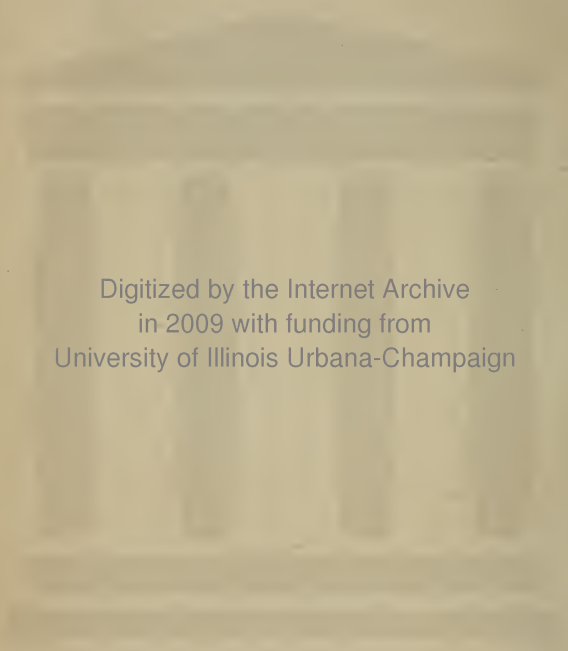


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THE POOR RELATION.

A NOVEL.

BY

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"THE LIFE OF MARIE DE MEDICIS,"

"THE CITY OF THE SULTAN,"

&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE POOR RELATION.

CHAPTER I.

MANŒUVRING.

DURING the absence of Lady Harriette and her son, which was prolonged far beyond their original intention owing to the confusion in which the earl had left his affairs, and the complicated legal business consequent upon this disorder, the health of Sir Hercules Ashton became so precarious that Ella was in constant attendance in the sick-room ; while her cousins, suddenly deprived of their usual sources of amusement, moved listlessly about the house, thankful when some casual visitor broke in

even for an hour, upon the monotony of their existence. Lord Elwood, debarred from the constant companionship of Matilda, had seized the opportunity of arranging some business in a neighbouring county; and a strange depressing quiet had fallen upon Ashton Court, which affected the spirits of the whole household.

The reflections of the orphan, as she moved noiselessly about the bed of her uncle, were very sad. The letters of Lady Harriette contained constant accounts of her father's reckless expenditure; the heavy mortgages which burthened his estates; the property which he had alienated; the difficulties which she encountered in the transfer of the title to her son; and the enormous expenses of the necessary legal documents.

The mental irritation produced by these perpetual annoyances had a very unfavourable effect upon the physical condition of the baronet, whose attacks of gout became more frequent and more severe than ever; and, during his periods of comparative ease, he dwelt unceasingly upon the embarrassments

which had accumulated upon him ; and from which he should be unable to liberate himself probably for years. Now, more than she had ever yet done, the orphan felt herself oppressed by a sense of dependence at once irksome and painful, for she knew too well that after the return of Lady Harriette, when the excitement occasioned by the important events by which she was then engrossed had subsided, she would make no effort to conceal her displeasure and indignation at the attachment which she had presumed to feel, and even to acknowledge, for her cousin.

That this attachment was now utterly hopeless was evident from the tone of her aunt's letters, in which details of the pompous interment of the earl, for whom Horace had officiated as chief mourner ; and undisguised exultation at the amount of the property which he must ultimately inherit, were blended with her lamentations over present difficulties. Her son had, by the express desire of His Royal Highness, been presented to one of the Princes, who had kindly assured him of the pleasure which he should feel in seeing him

succeed to the honors of his grandfather ; while many of her old acquaintance, who had long forgotten her existence, suddenly became anxious to resume a friendship interrupted from the period of her marriage, and to introduce their children, among whom were several fair and fashionable girls, who were all smiles and courtesy.

The countess, as she was styled until the transfer of the title should be effected, had received all their advances with equal civility, and had ostentatiously presented her son to the young beauties who fluttered about her ; and, although the recent death of her father precluded her own appearance in public, the first two months of mourning had no sooner expired than she insisted that Horace should avail himself of the most eligible of the invitations which were showered upon him. Even harassed as she was by the constant demands made upon her time by lawyers, stewards, and agents, she resolved not to lose so favourable an opportunity of weaning her son from his attachment to his cousin ; and of impressing him with the social importance of rank

and station. Surely, she argued to herself, he will never be mad enough, after he has become familiar with the highly-born and elegantly-mannered women by whom he is now surrounded, to cling to the insane fancy of his boyhood. She reasoned, however, with the head, and not with the heart. That the young man was dazzled by the splendour to which he was thus suddenly introduced, and somewhat intoxicated by the flattery which, as if inadvertently, met his ear is undeniable ; but not one among the bevy of beauties who crowded the gilded saloons of the duchesses and peeresses who welcomed him so warmly, appeared to him comparable to the absent Ella.

Had any idea been entertained in the courtly circle he now frequented, that the estate of the deceased earl had been so heavily encumbered as to render the inheritance merely nominal for years, and that its only present effect was to cripple the family of the inheritor, Horace would undeniably have been met by fewer smiles and less earnest greetings ; but even while aware of the reckless career of Lord

Disborough, and his constant embarrassments, the world could not easily be led to believe that a man whose income was known to be a splendid one, might, extravagant though he was, actually ruin himself ; and thus when a few more far-sighted individuals ventured to hint at the probability of a bankrupt-heir, they were met by resolute disclaimers from the crowd ; and fairly sneered down by mothers who were blessed with two or more marriageable daughters.

Consequently the town career of Mr. Horace Ashton, *quasi*-Earl of Disborough—for Lady Harriette had not lost an hour in making known her intention of transferring the title to her son, should it be practicable—was most brilliant ; his fine and intellectual countenance, his noble figure, and the polished ease of his manner, caused even the most fastidious of the high-born beauties about him to forget the son of the country baronet in the travelled gentleman and the future peer ; and thus, had he possessed a lighter head and a more fickle heart, he might on several occasions have had the honour of engrafting a new title on the

family tree of the Ashtons. No such idea, however, crossed the mind of Horace ; his father had told him that he was too young to marry ; and since he had discovered the resolute opposition of Lady Harriette to his union with Ella, he perfectly coincided in that opinion. He was therefore considerably startled when one morning, as he was lying on the sofa loitering over the daily paper, and reposing himself after a night of dissipation, in order to prepare for that by which it was to be succeeded, his mother suddenly looked up from her embroidery-frame, without which she never stirred from home even for a week, and said with a smile full of arch meaning :

“ So you danced three times with Lady Constance, my dear boy ? ”

“ Yes ; ” was the languid reply ; “ she waltzes so uncommonly well.”

“ And what said the duchess ? ”

“ The duchess ? Nothing. She never interferes, except to seek partners for her daughters when they have not secured them for themselves.”

“ Lady Constance is a sweet creature.”

“ They are all sweet creatures.”

His mother smiled again. “ But you prefer Lady Constance to either of her sisters, do you not ?”

“ Most decidedly.”

“ I find ;” said the countess ; “ that you have made a very favourable impression on the duke, who assured me of his great gratification at the terms in which His Royal Highness expressed himself about you on the day of your presentation. Now this was very kind of His Grace, and I cannot help feeling highly flattered, as he is by no means a demonstrative person.”

“ I am also sincerely obliged to him ;” yawned the young man, as he stretched his arms, and fluttered the paper above his head ; “ he has always been very condescending and amiable to me ; and, by the bye, my dear mother, it was the duke who personally invited me to join their party to Richmond next week ; the card of the duchess was only a reminder.”

“ I am delighted to hear it. It always produces a good effect when a man of his age and station takes a marked interest in a person so much younger than himself. But I have not

yet told you all. His Grace replied to the comments of the Prince by saying how much he should regret that any insurmountable obstacle should prevent your elevation to the peerage during my life-time; and he was even good enough to repeat to me the very words which he had used; ‘Mr. Ashton, sir;’ he said to His Royal Highness; ‘is precisely the description of person calculated to do honor to the Upper House. He is full of intelligence, and good sense; has studied other countries besides his own; and has acquired habits of observation and sound judgment very remarkable in so young a man.’ Now this you must confess, Horace, coming from the Duke of Windermere, was calculated to serve you in every way; and that it did so, was evident from the rejoinder of the Prince: ‘I am glad to hear you say so, my lord duke; very glad to hear you say so;’ replied His Royal Highness; ‘and you may depend upon my interest for your young friend should it be in my power to serve him.’”

“Most kind and flattering on both sides, my dear mother;” said her gratified listener, as

his eye kindled, and a flush passed over his cheek ; “and I need not tell you that I am truly grateful.”

“ You have cause to be so, Horace ; for it is rare indeed that two such friends are acquired within a few weeks, and I now begin to consider our success as certain ; an opinion in which I am confirmed by the amiable duchess, who is as much delighted as her husband. They are certainly a charming family.”

“ They are indeed.”

“ It is a sad thing ;” pursued the countess ; “ that His Grace should have no son, and that his title and estates should go to a nephew whom he particularly dislikes. It would have made a great difference to those sweet girls had it been otherwise.”

“ It must be mortifying in all ways ;” acquiesced her companion ; “ one son and four daughters would have been far better in every respect than five daughters and no son.”

“ However, there can be no doubt that they will all marry well ;” continued Lady Harriette ; “ they are so singularly beautiful and accomplished. Apropos to accomplishments,

Horace, her Grace has held out a hope to me that she will present you to the Princesses, so that when you attend the Drawing-Rooms next season you will not be quite a stranger."

"That will be kind indeed."

"Can you form any idea how many times you have danced with Lady Constance since you first met her, my dear boy?"

"Not the least in the world. Very frequently, I know; for occasionally when some one has asked her hand of whom the duchess disapproved, she has sent to request me to engage her."

"Very flattering, you must admit; and I must thank her Grace for the compliment she has paid you; but has it never occurred to you to suspect that others may have remarked this preference, and been jealous of it?"

"Jealous!" echoed Horace; "jealous of what?"

"You are new to the world, my son;" said the countess sententiously; "or you would have felt that these constant attentions could not fail to compromise Lady Constance if you had no serious intentions; and this I

am convinced I need not tell you, would be at once ungrateful and dishonourable on your part; as the duchess would never have given you such opportunities had she not believed that you were more than commonly attracted by her daughter, and that she tacitly approved your suit."

"In that case I will carefully avoid committing myself any further;" said the young man in a tone of compunction; "as I never for an instant imagined that the encouragement which I have received could be intended to imply anything of the sort."

"It is too late;" was the cold reply; "I know from the duchess herself that your names have been coupled together in every drawing-room and club in London. It is unfortunate that I was not present to warn you against your imprudence, of which in my retirement I of course knew nothing; but I trust and believe that *my* son will never be guilty of any act which may tend to affix a stigma to his name."

"Is it possible;" exclaimed Horace indignantly; "that the Duchess of Windermere

has condescended to volunteer such a piece of information ! I should have thought that she had more regard both for her own dignity and that of her daughter."

"It is because she is so sensitively alive to that dignity that she mentioned the circumstance to me ;" retorted the countess ; "and I own that I felt greatly honoured by the kind and delicate terms in which she did so ; for I confess I never anticipated that she would tolerate your addresses for an instant."

"My addresses, mother !"

"Your addresses, Horace. Young men do not shew themselves night after night in the train of so distinguished a person as Lady Constance, without its being generally considered that they feel themselves authorised to do so. There can be no doubt, my son, that it is to this undisguised preference of his daughter, that you owe the good offices of the duke with His Royal Highness."

"Should it be so ;" was the remark of Horace as he rose from the sofa ; "I am less obliged to him than I thought. In all probability I shall never marry."

“Pray do not be absurd ;” said Lady Harriette angrily ; “ You owe yourself to your family—you *must* marry—and, moreover,” she added emphatically ; “ marry well. Here you have an opportunity which may never recur. The young lady is, as I could gather, by no means insensible to your merits ; she has rank, beauty, fashion — everything, in short, calculated to win the love of your sex ; —her fortune will not, indeed, be a large one for the daughter of a duke ; but when the incumbrances on the Disborough property are paid off, that circumstance will be altogether unimportant. I frankly admitted to her Grace that for the next few years you would be somewhat crippled in your resources ; but I assured her at the same time that I felt convinced, should you indeed be happy enough to win the affections of her lovely daughter, you would make such a prospective settlement upon her as would amply compensate for the delay ; while, in the meantime, you must be well aware that the thirty thousand pounds which the duke is prepared to give her on her marriage would be of immense service to us all.”

“You surely cannot be serious, mother, in implying that such a conversation as this has taken place between the duchess and yourself without my knowledge and sanction?”

“You had, from all that I can learn, so openly committed yourself in the business, that I did not consider either to be necessary.”

“Am I then to understand ;” said the young man, with an indignation which he made no effort to conceal ; “that because her Grace of Windermere has, pretexting her friendship for yourself, thrown her daughter in my way on every occasion, I am bound to make her my wife ? The very idea is monstrous ! I cannot gamble away the happiness of my whole life for a few smiles and a high-sounding title. I repeat what I before said, that I shall in all probability never marry ; for if my hand and my affections cannot go together, I may at least refuse to separate them.”

“Horace ;” said Lady Harriette with a threatening gesture ; “be careful not to try me too far ; for I declare to you that should you still, as I begin to suspect, adhere to your insane attachment for your father’s niece, I

will at once cancel all my late proceedings, and retain the honors which are now mine by right."

"Do so, my dear mother ; do so, I entreat of you !" exclaimed her son ; " You know how earnestly I made the request when you first informed me of your intention to resign them. I care little for worldly distinctions which I should not owe to my own merits and exertions ; and I would rather remain the obscure individual I now am, than purchase even the most glorious of them by the loss of my peace of mind and self-respect."

"High-sounding phrases enough ;" said the countess ; " but we are not I believe rehearsing a tragedy. I do not ask you for sentiment but for common sense. You know the present position of your family. You know the sacrifices which your father has made——"

"My poor father !" murmured Horace.

"And you also know ;" pursued Lady Harriette, disregarding the apostrophe ; " that although his income is large, the current demands upon him are great also ; and that it

will consequently be impossible for him to do much in liquidation of the Disborough incumbrances until this railway speculation recruits his finances ; while, in the event of its failure, we shall be reduced to comparative poverty. I was not prepared for such egotism on your part."

" You mistake me, mother ;" was the proud reply ; " there is no effort from which I would shrink, no hardship which I would not be willing to undergo to secure the happiness and honor of my family ; but you must forgive me if I venture to echo your words, and to entreat of you in my turn not to try me too far. I will do anything—everything—save degrade myself in my own eyes."

" Sophistry !" broke in the countess ; " aye, and worse than sophistry, when you are conscious that you are willing to rush upon degradation by uniting yourself to a penniless orphan."

" Your ladyship forgets ;" observed her son ; " that she would not have been penniless, had she not nobly resigned her all to assist my father in a moment of difficulty."

“Two thousand pounds!” said the countess, with a sneer playing on her thin lips.

“Yet not the less her *all* ;” was the calm retort ; “nor are we at present in a position to despise even so small a sum as that. But let us not pursue this subject, mother ; let no unkind feeling come between us. Hitherto we have been a happy and an united family ; latterly we have had trials which should bind us only the more closely together ; let us bear them with one heart and one mind. I pledge myself, painful as it is to do so, never to marry against your wishes ; but I can promise nothing more ; for never will I consent to perjure myself by uttering vows which could only be lip-deep, and thus wrong the woman who confided in my honour and sincerity.”

“And will you be kind enough to inform me ;” asked Lady Harriette, struggling to suppress her anger ; “what I am to say to the Duchess of Windermere ?”

“Willingly. Tell her the truth. Tell her how truly I deplore the error into which she has fallen ; how grateful I am for her condescension ; and with what delight, had my

affections been disengaged, I should have accepted the honour which she was willing to confer upon me."

"A sure and simple method of exciting her indignation and resentment."

"And wherefore? She esteems you so highly, that when you explain to her——"

"What am I to explain?" demanded Lady Harriette vehemently; "Do you wish me to tell one of the noblest ladies in the land that your father's brother was a bankrupt merchant, who left a pauper child to the charity of her relations, and that my son is degenerate enough to prefer this girl to her own graceful and accomplished daughter?"

"Mother! do not teach me to hate Lady Constance; for she, at least, is guiltless in all this. Tell her that from my boyhood I have anchored my every hope of happiness upon one object—that you believed the love I felt for my cousin to have been merely a passing fancy which time would suffice to dispel; that you have discovered your mistake; and that——"

"Never;" said the countess, as she pushed

away her embroidery frame, and in her turn rose from her seat ; “ you have entangled yourself by your own vanity and imprudence, and I leave you to extricate yourself as you best can. You have followed the example of Florence : you have thwarted all my plans for your advancement in life ; while Matilda, the last of my children upon whom I relied for happiness, has been the only one who has repaid me for all my anxiety and care. Henceforward I shall look to her alone for consolation and support under my heavy trials.”

“ Mother, does Florence — do I — deserve this ?”

“ The question is ill-timed and misplaced, Mr. Horace Ashton. Be satisfied. You will, perhaps, have the gratification ere long, of feeling at how high a price you have purchased—I believe that was your own expression some time back—the triumph of lowering your mother in the estimation of her former friends. But, sir, you will do well to remember that although I am the wife of Sir Hercules Ashton, I am not the less the daughter of the Earl of Disborough ; that you are now

under my roof; and that I will not be insulted with impunity."

"Insulted!" faltered her son; "Insulted, mother! Surely, because I cannot—because I *dare* not,—be false to myself, you cannot suspect me of the turpitude of insulting *you*. I should be unworthy to be called a man could I be guilty of such a crime at any moment; but at this—at this—when you are not only willing, but resolute, to make so great a sacrifice in order to ennoble me, you must not, you cannot, believe it possible."

"I have learnt to know that all is possible."

"Mother;" continued Horace; "in your anxiety for my aggrandisement you have allowed yourself to overlook the penalties of greatness. Cast your eyes over this desolate apartment; remember the cheerless and unloved old age of him by whom it was so recently tenanted. Would you give one day of the peace and happiness of Ashton Court for this empty mockery of splendour? Would you exchange the tenderness of children who love you, for the time-serving obsequiousness of the liveried lacqueys who received their dis-

missal without one tear, and without one regret? Oh, surely, surely not."

"Horace;" said Lady Harriette; "if my children really loved me they would be influenced by my advice, and obedient to my wishes: while they rebel against both, I have every right to doubt their affection. Love begets obedience, while I am thwarted on every point."

"These are harsh words from the lips of a mother to her son;" said the deeply-wounded young man; "I never feared to hear them; for I am not conscious of any act of mine by which I can have merited such a reproach; while I can equally pledge myself that of none such will I ever be guilty. In obedience to your wishes I have resolved to abandon all hope of becoming the husband of my cousin; but this concession must suffice; I cannot promise more; for were I to become the husband of any other woman I should be a perjured man."

"I have not patience to listen any longer to such rhapsodies;" imperiously broke in Lady Harriette; "I shall hold no further

argument with you upon the subject; but remember that you are warned. It now, therefore, remains for you to decide if you consider that you are fulfilling your duty to yourself and your family by making an enemy of the Duke of Windermere, forfeiting the good opinion and interest of the Prince, and wounding the feelings of an innocent and confiding girl, whom you have led to believe that you loved her. Should you consider that you are privileged to do this, all further expostulation is of course idle; but if, on more mature reflection, your better reason prompts a different course of action, I shall be ready and willing to overlook your present folly."

Horace was about to reply when a servant entered the room and approached the countess, to whom he handed a letter which she hastily tore open. She had scarcely cast her eyes hurriedly over the first page, when with pale cheeks and quivering lips, she sank down upon a chair, while the paper rattled in her trembling fingers. As she reached the conclusion she gasped for breath, and wiped away the clammy dew which had gathered

upon her forehead ; but after a time by a violent effort she mastered her emotion, and holding out the letter to her son, she said briefly and harshly :

“ Read that.”

Horace did as he was bidden ; and as rapidly as his mother had done he glanced over the fatal missive ; like her, too, he was for a time overwhelmed with consternation ; the valley of Marshfield—the far-extending level over which surveyors and engineers had uttered pæans of self-gratulation—had proved its right to the name it bore. The treacherous morass over which alike the plough and the loaded wain had passed without betraying any indication of its real nature, was unable to support the iron weight recently pressed upon its surface. Down and down sunk rails and sleepers, gradually but surely ; and as the works progressed at one extremity of the line, they fell into ruin at the other. Gigantic efforts were made to arrest the progress of this unanticipated evil, efforts which necessitated a lavish expenditure ; but although stones, earth, and faggots were cast into the

slough by thousands of waggon-loads, no impression had as yet been made upon the marsh, which swallowed up all that was flung into it.

The surveyors were aghast—the directors furious—and their consternation reached its climax when it was discovered that a new line through the heights skirting the plain must be marked out, as every point across the level was utterly hopeless. Thus, gold had been squandered; labour flung away; time lost; and the bright perspective which had cheered every heart, and nerved every arm, was lost in the distance; while, as a necessary consequence of this unfortunate and fatal deception, an immediate and heavy call was once more made upon the shareholders.

Now, but unhappily too late, Lady Harriette remembered that it was not only at her suggestion, but in compliance with her determined and persevering solicitations, that her husband had been induced to embark in this most ruinous speculation. The large sum of money for which a portion of the Ashton property had so recently been mortgaged, barely sufficed to

meet the exigences of her father's complicated affairs ; and now there was no alternative save to abandon the shares for which so heavy an amount had been paid, and with them all the bright hopes in which she had so long indulged ; or in retaining them, to see her husband complete his already painful sacrifice by raising another mortgage upon the very home of his ancestors.

No wonder that her proud spirit was crushed even to the dust. Before her stood her son, the representative of two ancient families, whose sole inheritance would be difficulty, obscurity, and privation ; and once more all the mother awoke in her bursting heart, as extending her arms towards him, she pressed him to her bosom, and fainted.

CHAPTER II.

A PAGE FROM THE WORLD'S VOLUME.

POOR Sir Hercules Ashton, weakened alike in body and mind by his late severe sufferings, earnestly urged the return of his wife and son the instant that their presence could be dispensed with in London. The letter containing this request was written by Florence, who described her father as utterly prostrated by this last blow, and quite unable to act for himself; while even the sanguine Mr. Goldworthy was wringing his hands and cursing his unlucky stars that had led him to involve his property in an undertaking about which he understood literally nothing; the whole county, as she declared, was in a state of consternation im-

possible to describe ; and meanwhile the company were in treaty for more land ; for which, aware of the exigences of the case, its owners demanded the most exorbitant sums. The Marshfield hills were to be blasted ; tunnels to be formed ; and the din of preparation was already loud.

The anxiety of Lady Harriette was very great. In her eagerness to carry out her objects with her son, and full of the splendid atmospheric castles which she had reared in the future, she had suffered herself to forget present prudence. Her stay in London had, moreover, as we have already stated, far exceeded her anticipations ; and she now suddenly found herself called upon to return home, uncertain as to the question of succession ; and doubtful of her ultimate success as regarded Lady Constance.

It is true that when his mother, after reading the fatal letter, had pressed him to her heart with all the old tenderness which had blessed his boyhood, ere she had learnt to forget the child she cherished in the man by whom her family were to be aggrandised—the

transmitter of the title which must otherwise have devolved upon a distant relative totally unknown to her—at that moment, as he listened to the hysterical murmur of “Save us, Horace, save us!” he had impulsively replied; “Any thing—everything — Am I not your son?”

Poor fellow! He only felt that the tide of ruin was rushing towards those whom he loved best on earth; and that he, and he alone, could be the dam to check its progress!

When, however, he once more found himself alone in his room, whither he had hastened to reflect in solitude upon the painful crisis of his father's affairs, a feeling of utter desolation fell upon him. He could have cheerfully supported the change of circumstances by which he was threatened: young and sanguine, he would have trusted to the future to redeem the present; but the evil struck deeper; and he could not contemplate the existence of duplicity and self-sacrifice to which the ambition of his mother had condemned him, without a shudder. He had, moreover, been both pained and disgusted to find that the apparently

cordial regard which had been so lavishly bestowed upon him by the Duke and Duchess of Windermere had grown out of a project of their own, which it was destined to aid in effecting. All seemed hollow about him ; even to his own parents he could not turn for comfort, for it was through them that the evil had come ; and, consequently, every murmur from his lips would sound like a reproach. Suddenly the hot blood rushed to his cheek, and a deep sense of humiliation caused him to bury his face in his hands. For what had he been urged, even in the very hour when he ascertained the new difficulties by which his family were overwhelmed, to marry Lady Constance Trevor ? Was it not that her fortune might be made the prey of their necessities ? He could not blind himself to the fact. Even the ambition of his mother had yielded before the terror of the liabilities whose extent she was unable to calculate ; and she had called upon him to save them by an act of meanness and egotism which must render him for ever degraded in his own eyes. Who could say, moreover, that he would ever be

enabled to complete those prospective settlements by which their Graces of Windermere had declared themselves satisfied in the event of his marriage with their daughter? Crippled as the Disborough and Ashton estates must continue for years, he at once felt that he should not be the only victim ; for how could he anticipate that a spoiled child of wealth and fashion like Lady Constance—an unloved wife—whose fancy rather than her heart must lead her to bestow her hand upon the mere acquaintance of a few weeks, would brook so keen a disappointment as that which awaited her? The reflection was hideous ! And then there rose up before him the image of Ella ; of the noble girl who would, as he well knew, have welcomed any struggle for his sake ; but who, when she saw him the husband of another, and comprehended the motive of his cold-blooded and unmanly conduct, would despise him from her very soul.

It was too much ; and Horace, totally overcome by the vision which he had thus evoked, bent down his head, and wept. They were the first tears that he had shed since his

boyhood, and they were very bitter ; but they nevertheless gradually soothed him ; and after a time he even learnt to hope that both Lady Harriette and himself had taken too gloomy a view of their pecuniary embarrassments ; and that on reaching Ashton Court, and ascertaining the precise state of affairs, some means of escape from their difficulties might be discovered. How or whence this relief was to come, he did not suffer himself to inquire ; but, with the buoyant trustfulness of youth, he rather sought to encourage the feeling of “something may yet turn up,” which has occasionally helped even the wisest of us over what our neighbours across the channel call a *mauvais pas*.

With Lady Harriette, however, the case was very different. She had at once seen, and fully appreciated, the true nature of the position in which by her strong will and reckless ambition she had involved her family at a moment peculiarly critical to several of its members ; and she resolutely shut her eyes to the unworthiness of the only method by which she hoped to extricate herself from the

consequences of her own acts. She had wrung from Horace, in a moment of strong emotion, what she determined to consider as a pledge that he would offer his hand to Lady Constance Trevor ; and as this was the solitary point upon which she had brought her diplomacy to a successful issue, she hastened without the loss of a moment to put it beyond his power to retract his promise, by writing to inform her "dear friend" the duchess that she had at length been admitted to the confidence of her son ; and that so soon as his accession to her father's title should be secured, he would proudly lay his coronet at the feet of her charming daughter ; while the terms of the settlement, as accepted by His Grace and the duchess, could be arranged and concluded by both parties in the mean time.

To this communication she received an immediate reply, in which she was assured that nothing would give the ducal pair more gratification than an union between their own family and that of so old and esteemed a friend as Lady Disborough ; while they scarcely regretted the fact that the young

couple might be compelled for a year or two to exercise a certain amount of economy which would enable them the better to appreciate the princely fortune to which they must ultimately succeed. Her darling Constance, she said, appeared totally indifferent to every money consideration, declaring that she loved Mr. Ashton for himself, and cared little for the honours which awaited him. "Indeed, my dear countess;" pursued her Grace; "none of my girls have a single taint of worldliness about them; and I can assure you, *entre nous*, that this is so decidedly the case, that it has required all my maternal vigilance to persuade one of them (not Constance, for she, poor child! gives to your son the first love of her young heart) from sacrificing herself to a penniless younger brother, to whom even her insignificant portion would have been a serious consideration. Can you for one moment imagine such perfect singleness of spirit? I think that I may take some credit to myself, and particularly in my position, for having preserved in them this purity of disposition; for really when I look round me, and see how some mothers sacrifice

their children to their own selfishness, the only marvel is that more follies are not committed by a parcel of weak and giddy young creatures, who suffer their heads to run away with them while they fancy that they are obeying the impulse of their hearts. I am thankful that in *our* case we need have no apprehension of the sort ; for my dear girl is so sincerely attached to Mr. Ashton that I am convinced she never could be induced to give her hand to any other individual, whatever might be his rank or pretensions. Indeed, the prompt and willing cheerfulness with which she consented to the temporary sacrifice you so frankly told the duke and myself would be necessary, leaves no doubt upon that point. I am instructed by His Grace to inform you, with his cordial respects, that our family solicitor will beready to meet your own man of business at any time which you and Mr. Ashton may appoint, in order to conclude those mere worldly arrangements so tedious to lovers, but so essential to their after-happiness ; and we both feel satisfied that, with prospects so brilliant before him, Mr. Horace Ashton

will not fail to requite our dear girl nobly for her present forbearance. That we may soon have the gratification of welcoming the new Earl of Disborough to what he must now consider as his second home, is our sincere wish."

There was much in the tone of this note which was repugnant to the pride of Lady Harriette; an assumption of superiority and condescension that she felt to be alike ill-timed and misplaced, when she was aware that the duchess, anxious to secure a husband for her favorite daughter, was exulting in the success of her own manœuvring; and that had her son been destined to go through life a simple country baronet, she would never have consented to the marriage. The letter itself revealed this fact; and as the countess restored it to its tinted and perfumed envelope, she smiled a smile of scorn at the shallow diplomacy of her noble acquaintance.

"Did she imagine;" she asked herself; "that I was weak enough to believe, when the butterflies of fashion gathered about me, and welcomed me back to my old haunts after

years of absence, that I for an instant attributed their unlooked-for cordiality to any regard for myself? If so, she was deceived. I had only to remark that it was those who had daughters to provide for who were the most anxious to recal themselves to my recollection, to appreciate at once the motive of their very flattering civility. All duke's daughter as she is, Lady Constance Trevor might have failed to become a peeress had not her parents been willing to make concessions even greater than those to which they will be compelled by her marriage with my son; and we consequently meet on equal terms. Had not this wretched affair occurred, which has tied my hands, and fettered my actions, I would have taught her this truth, unpalatable as it might have proved; but under existing circumstances I must be passive, and bear with her haughty folly for a time."

She did so; and the leave-taking of the two high-born ladies was more than urbane, it was affectionate, almost affecting; and when Lady Harriette impressed a kiss on the fair cheek of her future daughter-in-law, a tear started to

the eye of the stately duchess as she declared that she really knew not how she should ever be able to part from her darling Constance, who had so long been the object of her tenderest affections. Something, too, she hinted of her surprise that Mr. Ashton should not have accompanied the countess in her parting visit ; she would have been so happy to have presented him herself to her daughter as her affianced husband ; while she was sure that the duke would share in her regret. It was so annoying and unreasonable that those insufferable lawyers should absorb every moment of his time, and that he should leave town before the day fixed for their party to Richmond ; but of course they should see him when the business which called him into the country was arranged ; and she could assure her dear countess that she would do all in her power to render his visit pleasant to him.

Lady Constance said little ; but she was evidently both astonished and pained. She could not understand how any legal engagements, however stringent ; or any business, however urgent, could so thoroughly monopo-

lise the time of a man who had just asked and obtained the hand of the woman whom he loved, sufficiently to prevent his expressing to her the gratification which he felt at his success ; and it is probable that she might have ventured some remark to that effect, had she not been conscious that the eye of her mother was upon her. As it was, she endeavoured to conceal her mortification as much as possible ; but it did not escape the penetration of the astute visitor, who had anticipated only too well the effect which must necessarily be produced by the resolute determination of Horace not to commit himself personally by word or look, until he became firmly and fatally convinced that he must submit to the fate to which his mother had condemned him.

All parties were alike ill at ease ; for the duchess felt the slight which was offered to her daughter, although she had sufficient tact to accept with a bland and gracious smile the apologies and explanations which were volubly poured forth by Lady Harriette, who overwhelmed her with assurances of the distress of her son at the privation to which he was sub-

jected, and his impatience to pour out before his lovely bride-elect all the tenderness with which his heart was filled.

The acting was perfect on both sides ; the elder ladies first clasped hands, and ultimately touched cheeks—they were, as they declared, already sisters in heart. The fair Constance was once more folded in the arms of the departing guest ; and on the following morning Horace and his mother set out for their once happy, but now sadly altered, home.

CHAPTER III.

WAYS AND MEANS.

“BUT surely, Mr. Goldworthy, such an occurrence must be almost unprecedented ;” exclaimed Lady Harriette, as that worthy, but very crest-fallen gentleman, concluded a somewhat complicated explanation of the mischances which had entailed so much anxiety and discomfort upon Sir Hercules ; “There must have been some serious, and even culpable mismanagement somewhere.”

“I can assure you, my lady countess ;” was the reply ; for even at that agitating moment, her companion—who had never before enjoyed the privilege of conversing with a peeress — felt a certain pleasure in hearing her high-

sounding title proceed from his own lips, and paused for a second to feast upon the luxury ; “ I can assure you, my lady countess ;” he repeated unctiously ; “ that no fault can be attributed to any one. It was the nature of the soil which caused the disaster, and involved us in these new difficulties.”

“ But, sir ;” said Lady Harriette with increased acerbity ; “ when you persuaded me to induce Sir Hercules to become a shareholder in this wretched railway, you made no allusion to such contingencies as these ; and we were consequently, quite unprepared for them. You are probably not aware that the decease of Lord Disborough has for the moment subjected us to a considerable increase of outlay, however much it may ultimately enrich his heirs ; and it is consequently most inconvenient for my husband to meet the new demand which you have made upon him.”

“ I am sorry, my lady ; very sorry indeed that it should be so ;” was the rejoinder ; “ but as I explained to my excellent friend Sir Hercules on a former occasion——”

“ I will not trouble you to repeat those

explanations, Mr. Goldworthy ;” said Lady Harriette impatiently ; “ what I desire to know is how we may extricate ourselves from the unfortunate dilemma in which we have been weak enough to become entangled. We are not at this time in possession of the large sum which you require, nor are we prepared to make a sacrifice to obtain it.”

“ I really cannot venture to offer your ladyship any advice upon so delicate a subject ;” said her companion ; “ It is, indeed, very unpleasant to me to speak on it at all.”

“ Think then how infinitely more unpleasant it must be for me to discuss it with you ;” was the haughty retort ; “ but still I would beg you to remember that it was entirely by your advice that we engaged in a speculation so foreign to our habits and prejudices.”

“ I trust that your ladyship does not suspect my motive for that advice ?”

“ I suspect nothing, my good sir ; but I would simply impress upon you that, such being the case, I have a right to look to you for assistance.”

“But, my dear madam, I am as great a sufferer as Sir Hercules.”

“I have no inclination to dispute that fact ;” said Lady Harriette ; “however much I may regret it. But come—be frank with me, Mr. Goldworthy—is there no way in which I can induce you to relieve us from our present anxiety ?”

There must have been something peculiar in the tone and look with which the question was put, for it evidently startled, and almost agitated, the person to whom it was addressed. He moved uneasily upon his chair, pressed his hat nervously between his hands with a force which greatly endangered its symmetry, passed his fingers through his hair, and finally replied by another question.

“Can you suggest one, my lady countess ?”

“Nay, nay ; that is unfair ;” said Lady Harriette almost playfully ; “you cannot surely expect that any such suggestion should come from me !”

“I cannot even guess at your ladyship’s meaning.”

“ Really ? ”

“ Positively I cannot. ”

“ In that case there is no more to be said ; ” and the lady once again folded herself in the icy mantle of her pride, while her look almost froze him ; “ I still remember an occasion, however, upon which you led me to believe—— ”

“ Madam ; ” interposed her companion ; “ can it be possible—— ”

“ Can what be possible ? ” and the thin lips parted with a smile ; she felt that she had been understood.

“ That you would indeed so highly honour me as to—— ” and again he paused.

“ Well, Mr. Goldworthy ? ”

“ As to admit me into your family. ”

“ Upon certain conditions, I do not see any valid reason why I should not do so. Your birth is not noble, it is true ; but neither is that of Miss Ella Ashton. Her father was, like yourself, a merchant ; a man of probity and honour ; although he unfortunately failed to make such a provision as his daughter, with her high connections, had a right to expect.

You know the young lady ; she is handsome, amiable, and accomplished ; and, in short, will make a wife of whom any peer of the realm might justly be proud. She has no fortune it is true ; but she possesses every other advantage. She has been educated under my own eye ; reared under my own roof ; and no one is more fully aware of her value than myself."

"And does your ladyship really encourage me to hope that I shall receive your sanction to ask her hand ?"

"Upon certain conditions, yes."

"And those conditions ?"

"Simply that you will meet the demand now made upon Sir Hercules. With your noble fortune the sacrifice will be a small one, while the prize will be commensurately great. So near a connection with the families of Disborough and Ashton will enhance your importance in the county ; while a lovely and highly-bred wife will give lustre and fashion to Goldworthy Hall."

"It shall be done, madam ; it shall be done ;" eagerly exclaimed the manufacturer,

at once dazzled and delighted by the brilliant prospect before him ; “ make your mind perfectly easy ; I agree to your terms without hesitation ; and the moment that I am assured of success with the young lady, that moment the money shall be forthcoming.”

“ Here, then, I pledge myself that she shall be yours ;” said Lady Harriette extending her hand, upon which the happy suitor pressed his lips ; “ let me see you again in a day or two, when I will communicate to you the progress of your suit.”

With a flood of earnest and voluble acknowledgments, Mr. Goldworthy thus courteously dismissed shortly afterwards withdrew ; extremely happy but considerably bewildered. He did not even ask to see Sir Hercules ; he wanted to be alone ; to think over, calmly and collectedly, the events of the last hour. Never before had the Ashton woods looked so stately ; never before had he so thoroughly appreciated the ancient grandeur of the fine old mansion. He traversed the avenue at a foot’s pace, and it seemed interminable ; he threw a sovereign to the lodge-keeper as she swung back the

iron gates surmounted by the arms of the family to let him pass ; his soul swelled high within him ; and the very horse he rode appeared to have caught the infection of his own sense of self-importance ; as, on gaining the high road, it pranced, and curvetted, and champed the bit in a manner quite unusual. Strange, disjointed visions passed before him : he saw Ella, in her proud, calm beauty, sweeping through the gaudy and gilded saloons of his elaborately decorated home ; and he wondered within himself how he should ever be able to regard her as his wife : to address her by her baptismal name ; and to consider her as bound to him by an indissoluble tie. Then uprose before his mental vision the form of Lady Harriette, and he whispered to himself, “ my aunt the countess ; ” while an unwelcome memory obtruded itself of the humble home of his childhood ; of the penurious habits of his dead mother, and the grasping, money-clutching egotism of his stern and strong-willed father ; the obscure school which had been his Alma Mater ; the privations of his boyhood, and all the

mortifications that he had endured until, upon the death of his parents he had found himself possessed of a fortune far beyond his most sanguine expectations. These memories passed away in their turn, and Goldworthy Hall again presented itself; the merchant was forgotten in the landed proprietor; and it was with a feeling of intense satisfaction that he dwelt upon one fact which had on several occasions, before he aspired to ally himself to nobility, given him some annoyance; Mr. Goldworthy was not aware that he had a single relation in the world. He had never heard either father or mother refer to their kindred; he had never seen a guest in his paternal home, save some neighbour asking or rendering assistance; he stood in short alone in the world; and with his present prospects he felt this to be a great privilege. He had risen with his fortunes, and had secured a certain position in society; but he was wise enough to be aware that his hold upon it was not so strong as to enable him to drag up others to his own level; and thus he dwelt with considerable complacency on the know-

ledge that neither his future wife, nor her aristocratic connections, would be enabled to look down upon those who would otherwise have had a natural claim upon him. The next subject of reflection which presented itself was the compact into which he had entered with Lady Harriette, and this was not quite so satisfactory; but still the happy old gentleman did not for a moment regret the pledge which he had given. He had sufficient shrewdness to feel that he had *bought a wife*, and that he was about to pay a high price for the luxury; but after all, the bargain was a good one, as the lady herself was everything that the most ambitious man could desire; while he should, moreover, be indebted to her for an alliance with persons whose names would not only serve him in the county, but must greatly increase his influence with his city friends.

It was therefore in a most hilarious frame of mind that the bridegroom elect, as he reached the boundary of his own grounds, began to attire himself in imagination in a bright blue coat relieved by brass buttons; a

white silk waistcoat, and kerseymere abridgements ; a resplendent pair of new top boots ; and the whitest of all kid gloves ; and he had no sooner done this, and rendered homage to the vision thus conjured up, than he became suddenly impelled by a new and brilliant idea.

He must offer a marriage-gift to his bride.

Poor Mr. Goldworthy was for a moment what sportsmen would call "brought up standing." He had occasionally heard of marriage-gifts, and had undoubtedly enjoyed more than one opportunity of investigating their nature ; but as in his tranquil bachelorhood he had never contemplated the probability of his own bridal, he had vouchsafed no attention to a matter in which he had no personal concern, and was consequently utterly unable to decide of what they should consist ; while a vague suspicion, moreover, grew upon him that the offerings made to the daughter of Mr. Smith the drysalter, or Mr. Jones the wine-merchant, might not be precisely those best calculated to suit the tastes, or compel the admiration, of the Countess of Disborough's niece. But there was Lady Harriette herself ! Where

could he find a better guide through this perplexing labyrinth of etiquette? Assuredly no where ; and so he resolved to place the matter in her hands, and be guided entirely by her advice.

“ Let me see you in a day or two ;” she had said :—

“ And so she shall ;” exultingly exclaimed Mr. Goldworthy, as he sank back in his chair, and placed his slippered feet upon the fender ; “ and it shall not be my fault if she does not declare me to be a trump—But no, no ; I must learn to sink all that—it would never do now. Your pardon, my lady countess ; I meant to say—a perfect gentleman.”

CHAPTER IV.

SELF-SACRIFICE.

THE composure with which, during the dialogue contained in the last chapter, Lady Harriette Ashton had disposed of the hand of her niece, would have done no discredit to a Prime Minister protocolising away the independence of his country ; but as we might—if privileged to do so—follow the powerful statesman to his closet, and there read upon his countenance his after-doubt of the legitimacy of the act, so must we now be permitted to linger beside the sofa of the lady, and endeavour to fathom the feeling with which she looked back upon the somewhat delicate dilemma in which she had so unhesitatingly

involved herself. That she by any means regretted her precipitancy we are not prepared to say ; but difficulties, piled like Pelion on Ossa, rose up before her the-moment she found herself alone.

She suddenly remembered that the orphan, dependent though she was, had *some* right to decide her own future destiny—that Sir Hercules, despite all her endeavours to the contrary, still retained much of his original single-heartedness, and chivalry of character ; and that he would never permit his brother's child to be coerced into any measure repugnant to her feelings, however much that coercion might serve his own interests ; while, moreover, her son would resist to the uttermost this exhibition of her authority, which, should it prove successful, would not only put an end to his own hopes for ever, but also excite his indignation at the advantage which had been taken of the helpless position of his cousin. Still the thing must be done ; and the only question with Lady Harriette was how to do it most effectually, by making the measure appear to be the spontaneous work of Ella herself.

Accordingly, she settled herself more commodiously among her cushions, and took a long survey of the past. There could not be a question that the life of the orphan beneath her uncle's roof had been anything but a happy one—wherefore, she did not pause to enquire—without fortune, and without prospects—for, of course, her insane attachment to Horace was unworthy of a moment's consideration—what more brilliant future could Miss Ella Ashton anticipate than the one which she had secured for her?—while it was undeniably her duty to repay the debt of gratitude that she owed to her uncle by every means in her power. Here was an opportunity to test the sincerity of that gratitude; the peace of mind, nay, even the life of Sir Hercules, in all probability depended on her becoming the wife of Mr. Goldworthy; for the nerves of the baronet were so much shaken, and his health so seriously impaired by recent events, that it was impossible to say if he would be able to bear up against any new trouble. *Some one* must decidedly make a sacrifice; and who so proper as the individual who owed everything to his affection?

Lady Harriette's spirit hardened as she thus argued with herself. To give her own daughter to the *parvenu* manufacturer was out of the question; and, much as it wounded her pride to be connected with him in any way, she understood him well enough to be convinced that no inducement, save that of an alliance with her family, would prevail with him to assist Sir Hercules at this critical crisis. That she should obtain any assistance in her project she felt to be hopeless; and every hour lost must necessarily decrease her chance of ultimate success—what she had to do must be done at once; and unpleasant as it was—and that it *was* unpleasant a disagreeable sensation of embarrassment, and a fluttering at her heart very unusual to her, did not permit her to doubt—she resolved immediately to announce to the orphan herself the proposal which had been made for her hand, and the consequences which her refusal would involve.

It was not until she laid her own hand on the bell, however, that she felt the whole difficulty of the task which she had undertaken. Ella had voluntarily rejected the handsome and

accomplished Hatherston ; the husband whom she had herself coveted for her favourite daughter ; she had extricated her uncle from his first difficulties by resigning her modest fortune ; she had borne uncomplainingly the injustice and unkindness of years. Should she fail to touch her affections, and to gain her consent by working upon her highest and holiest feelings, nothing but failure awaited her ; and failure in this case was almost synonymous with ruin. No wonder that such a consideration gave new strength to the resolution of the high-born egotist, who in her pride of place looked upon her fellow-mortals as mere tools born to work out her will. What was the unhappiness of an obscure orphan when placed in competition with the social degradation of an ancient family ? What the mere caprice of a girl, when opposed to the necessities of those upon whom the eye of the world was fixed, and who owed themselves to that world ?

Lady Harriette smiled a smile of scorn at her momentary weakness ; and when Ella, in obedience to her summons entered the

room, she had quite recovered her composure and self-possession.

“I have sent for you, my dear;” she said, inviting her by a gesture to seat herself; “to inform you of a circumstance which has just occurred, and in which you are deeply interested. Your uncle communicated to me, as it was natural that he should do, your rejection of Mr. Frank Hatherston. Nay, you need not blush so deeply; I am far from blaming you on that occasion, for the young man evidently acted from mere impulse, and I place little faith in impulsive persons. He was, moreover, too young to understand his own feelings; and it is highly probable that had you become his wife you would soon have found cause to repent the step that you had taken. I do not ask you *why* you declined to give him your hand. It would not be delicate to do so—it is enough to say that I quite approved your decision. You must, however, be aware that you have now reached an age when, should your choice be a judicious one, your friends can have no valid reason for objecting to your change of name; and—”

“I assure you, madam, that I have no wish—that I have never thought—”

“Of course not, my dear girl; of course not;” interposed Lady Harriette; “it was not probable that you should. With the exception of my son’s friend, you have never been thrown into contact with *any one* likely to respond to any such feeling on your part; and I trust that you have too much good sense to throw away your affections where they could never be returned, even if you had possessed the opportunity. I merely make this remark to prove to you my confidence in your discretion and sense of womanly dignity; but it was not for this purpose that I sent for you. I have a more serious communication to make. It is, as I need scarcely say, very painful to me to remind you, that with the exception of the small sum of which your uncle has taken charge, and which you may in point of fact regard as his gift, you are totally without fortune. Now to you, ignorant as you necessarily are of the world and its exactions, this may appear of very slight importance; but do not deceive yourself; the

men of the present day are seldom induced to marry portionless young ladies, whatever may be their personal merits ; and it is consequently most flattering to those who become, despite this drawback, the objects of a sincere and disinterested affection. I am proud to say, Ella, that you are one of these ; and that it now only depends upon yourself to secure wealth, station, and happiness."

"I do not understand you, madam."

"I will explain myself. Our excellent neighbour Mr. Goldworthy has just left me. He is a most estimable man, for whom your uncle and myself have the highest respect. You have seen but little of him, but it would appear that you have played the part of Cæsar, for he is devotedly attached to you, and has asked your hand. I am sure that Sir Hercules will be as much rejoiced as myself ; and I most sincerely congratulate you on so eligible a conquest."

"Madam ;" faltered the orphan ; "you surely jest."

"I trust that I shall never permit myself to jest upon such a subject ;" was the tart

rejoinder; "and I confess that I am greatly and painfully astonished at the manner in which you have received the intelligence which I undertook to communicate to you. It is not often, Miss Ella Ashton, that such a piece of good fortune occurs to a young lady in your position; and I therefore have to request that you will dispense with the coquetries common on such occasions, and enable me to ratify in your own name the promise which I have already made in that of your uncle."

"My uncle!" gasped the poor girl with white and quivering lips; "Surely my uncle can never have condemned me to such a life of misery."

"Do you aspire to a ducal coronet?" asked Lady Harriette with a withering sneer; "Have you forgotten in the niece of Sir Hercules Ashton, the daughter of—"

But her words were arrested in the utterance, as the orphan rose calmly and proudly from her seat, her previous emotion suddenly quelled by more powerful and highly-wrought feeling; and for a moment the two stood face to face, each gazing upon the other. The

magnificent beauty of Ella soared into sublimity under the tempest-breath of her withering indignation ; and even the stern spirit of her tormentor quailed as she at length said in a hard dry tone, utterly at variance with her usually low and subdued accents ; “ Enough, madam, enough. Injustice, tyranny, and wrong, I have borne uncomplainingly in my own person. I have been a menial in the family which should have cherished me ; and under the roof which once sheltered my father. I have never murmured ; never resented the insults which have been heaped upon me ; but do not therefore believe that I have not both felt and registered them. I can still bear ; still suffer ; but I am no longer a child ; and I will brook no reflections upon that father who, had his life been spared, would have repaid my wrongs a thousand-fold. No, madam, I am not likely to forget that although the niece of Sir Hercules Ashton, I am also the daughter of his brother ; and even could I have done so, you have spared no pains to preserve the fact fresh in my memory ; but believe me that had it been otherwise I should

still have honoured and cherished my dead parent with a reverence which I can never feel for any other being upon earth. For the sake of your own dignity, therefore, you will do well to avoid all depreciatory allusions to my father. I do not ask you to spare *me*. You have never yet extorted such an entreaty from me, nor shall I ever utter it. And now, madam, we will, should such be your pleasure, revert to the real object of this interview. My uncle has, if I understood you rightly, promised my hand without my knowledge or sanction to Mr. Goldworthy."

"I never made such an assertion, Miss Ella Ashton;" said Lady Harriette, endeavouring to rally from the astonishment excited by the new and startling character in which her niece had so suddenly appeared; and cowed in spite of herself by the glittering eye and dilating form before her; "I will thank you to be more accurate in your statements. I said, and I repeat, that it was I who made the promise in his name; but when persons suffer themselves to become maddened by passion, no one has a right to expect that they can be

particularly careful as to the words they utter."

"Oh, your ladyship mistakes me ;" said the orphan with a proud smile ; " my heart was wrung to think that my uncle, whose affection alone has enabled me for so many years to support an existence of wretchedness and neglect, could have so coldly thrust me from him at last ; and sought to make me the wife of a man of whom I know nothing, save that he has been the constant object of your own contempt and sarcasm. I am indeed thankful that it was not so. And now as you may perceive I am perfectly calm, and prepared to reply at once to the proposal which you have done me the honour to submit to me. I am obliged by the compliment that Mr. Goldworthy has paid me, but I have not the slightest intention to avail myself of it."

" And pray, if I may once more presume to put the question ;" said the countess ; " what do you expect to accomplish through the power of your charms, if you reject a gentleman of good reputation and ample property ?"

" I expect, madam, to retain my own inde-

pendence of action, and freedom of will. But I will no longer intrude upon your time. The subject of our conference is terminated for ever."

"Resume your seat if you please, young lady;" said Lady Harriette with an imperious gesture, as Ella rose from her chair, and prepared to leave the room: "It is by no means so near its conclusion as you appear to imagine. You may probably flatter yourself that I cannot fathom the reason of your present insane conduct. Be undeceived. I can read your very heart. You would be Countess of Disborough—a peeress of the realm—You! If I did not feel so keenly as I do the insulting arrogance of your presumption, I could laugh you to scorn. Put away such idle fallacies at once; for I declare to you that sooner than *my* son should lead you to the altar, I would follow his coffin to the vault of the Ashtons."

"I am not likely to contend for a hand which your ladyship yourself informed me was pledged to another," was the haughty rejoinder of the orphan.

"In order to convince me that such is the

case ;” said Lady Harriette ; “ I must insist on your accepting the addresses of Mr. Goldworthy.”

“ I will discuss the point no longer, madam ; I have already informed you of my decision,” replied Ella ; and once more she rose to go.

Lady Harriette was breathless with agitation and dismay. It was evident that her authority over her dependant niece was lost for ever ; for not the slightest evidence of fear or awe of herself could she detect either in her look or manner. Had she been an empress, dictating her will to those who had neither the right nor the power to dispute it, she could not have been more calm and dignified in her bearing. What was to be done ? Ella, although she knew it not, held in her hand the future fate of her uncle’s family. The poor, despised, and outraged orphan was the sole hope of two ancient but tottering houses. The countess fairly gasped as she saw her traverse the floor ; she must not be permitted to leave her in her present mood ; she must be compelled to obey her pleasure—But how ?

To Sir Hercules Lady Harriette dared not appeal, for she well knew that not even to save himself from utter ruin would he sacrifice the child of his brother. No, it was her own foot which must crush the head of this viper that had dared to raise itself up between her and her ambition ; but bitter as was the black drop seething at her heart she had sufficient astuteness to feel that she must hide it there, and meet her niece in a very different spirit from that which she had hitherto exhibited. The necessity was a cruel one ; to bow where she had bruised ; to humble herself where she had tyrannised ; to supplicate where she had been accustomed to command. The struggle was fierce but brief ; and the orphan had scarcely reached the door when the voice of her aunt once more arrested her steps. Had it retained its usual imperious tone she would have disregarded the summons ; but low, and sad, and tremulous, it fell upon her ear so strangely and so painfully that she did not hesitate for an instant.

“ Are you ill, madam ? ” she asked gently, as she once more approached her aunt.

“ Ill ? Yes, ill in spirit, and sick at heart, Ella ;” was the agitated reply ; “ weary of the world, and of all that it contains ; for all alike fails me in my hour of need.”

“ Can I serve you ? Can I decrease your unhappiness ?” again demanded the orphan.

“ You can—and you only. Oh, Ella, I had hoped that by a ready obedience to my wishes you would have spared me the humiliation to which I must now submit, if I would save your uncle from ruin, and probably from death ; for that he would survive the blow with which he is threatened I cannot for one moment hope.”

“ I entreat you, madam, to explain yourself.”

“ I will—I will—Sit down beside me, Ella ; and try to forget all save that it is a wife and a mother who is imploring of you to take pity upon her and hers.”

“ Compose yourself ; you are at present too much agitated to converse ;” said the orphan, as she took for the first time in her life the hand of the once haughty woman, who now lay pale and crushed among her cushions ;

“Surely you overrate the peril, be it what it may ; or it could not be in the power of one so helpless and so friendless as myself to aid you.”

The thin lips of Lady Harriette quivered ; but still there was something soothing in the touch of the soft hand in which her own was clasped, and in the low sweet accents which fell upon her ear ; and, she knew not why or how, but a vague feeling of hope stole into her heart, and helped to restore her to composure.

For a time not a word was spoken ; and then, in a choked and hurried voice, the tale was told. Earnestly, almost fiercely, the excited narrator dwelt upon all its darkest features—she explained to her appalled and trembling listener the successive trials to which Sir Hercules had been exposed ; the deceptions of which he had become the victim ; of the imperative necessity which there existed of his forsaking the home of his ancestors, dragging out his few remaining years in exile, and sleeping in a stranger’s grave at their close, should no method present itself of satisfying the demand now made upon him.

Carefully and resolutely did Lady Harriette, regardless of the pangs which she was inflicting upon the poor girl beside her, broaden and deepen every painful circumstance ; speak of the utter prostration of the brilliant prospects which were just opening on her son ; and exclaim, as she terminated her recital at the instant when she was well aware that all the sympathies of the orphan must be the most keenly excited :

“ Oh, that I could lie down and be at rest ; but my boy ! my boy ! ”

“ Have you then no hope ? None ? ” asked Ella faintly.

“ I had, but it has vanished. ”

“ Oh, do not say so ! Strive to hope on. My kind, good uncle—my dear cousins—Yourself, madam,—you who possess noble and influential friends—it cannot be that no hand will be stretched out to help you. ”

“ Will you extend your own, Ella, in our behalf ? ”

“ Mine ! madam, mine ! Can it be that I have indeed the power to aid you in this great trial ? ”

“It can, and is.”

The orphan cast a bewildered look upon her companion, as she gasped out, “But how?”

“I will tell you, Ella. You already know that Mr. Goldworthy has asked your hand, but you have yet to learn that he has proposed, in the event of your consent to become his wife, to relieve your uncle from all his difficulties, and to afford him time to retrieve himself——”

A shudder passed over the frame of the orphan, and the blood forsook her cheek and lips.

“He has, moreover, most generously volunteered to make a liberal settlement upon yourself.”

Ella waved her hand indignantly.

“I reminded him;” pursued Lady Harriette; “of the discrepancy of age which exists between you, and of the slight nature of your acquaintance; and endeavoured to prevail on him to render your uncle the necessary assistance without troubling you on the subject; but he was obdurate. Those he declared to be his conditions; and without

their fulfilment he resolutely refused to render us the slightest assistance."

She paused to ascertain the effect of this communication, but the orphan neither spoke nor moved.

"Under these circumstances;" she continued, hopeless of a reply; "we are, as you must understand from what I have confided to you, entirely at your mercy. You can save us if you will; and you can condemn us to years of poverty and exile, should it be your pleasure to do so."

"Madam;" at length exclaimed Ella, in a voice so harsh and hollow that it startled even herself; "you have not dealt generously with me. If indeed it were my fate to submit to the required sacrifice, I had at least the right to know that it had secured the peace of those for whom it was made. I cannot love the man who makes me the purchase-money of my uncle's safety. I can never respect him; for I can never forget the sordid bargain of which I was made the victim—but, madam, I can *marry* him; I can pay back the heavy debt which I owe to the brother of my father by the suf-

fering of a life—and it shall be paid. Only swear to me—solemnly swear to me, by all that you hold most dear on earth”——she struggled a moment for utterance ; “ by your love for your son, and by your prayers for his happiness, that you have been truthful with me—that you have not deceived me on a single point—that I, and I alone, possess the power by giving myself to this man, to extricate my uncle from his anxieties ; and then do with me what you will.”

As she ceased speaking she sank upon her knees ; and clasping her hands forcibly together, she murmured as if unconsciously ; “ ‘ Oh, that I had the wings of a dove ; then would I flee away, and be at rest.’ ”

“ I do swear it—most solemnly swear it ;” said Lady Harriette, heedless of the cry of anguish which welled up from a broken heart ; “ dear, generous girl ! How can I ever prove my gratitude ?”

In an instant her arms were about the neck of the orphan, but Ella instinctively recoiled as from the folds of a serpent, and rose once more to her feet.

“I will tell you ;” she faltered ; “ by pledging yourself not to let my uncle suspect all that this sacrifice must cost me ; for I know his heart too well to believe that he would ever build up his happiness upon the ruin of mine.”

“I will promise anything—everything”—said Lady Harriette eagerly, almost unable to conceal her exultation on perceiving that her victim was unconsciously tending towards the very point at which she secretly aimed ; “ Trust me implicitly ; and neither Sir Hercules, Horace, nor any individual of the family, shall have cause to think that you are not acting according to your own free will and wishes. I owe you too much to thwart you in any way.”

Again the head of the orphan drooped, and the single word “ Horace” escaped from her quivering lips ; not unheard, indeed, but utterly disregarded.

“One thing more, madam ;” said the poor girl, dashing away her tears, and looking full into the face of her companion ; “ There must be no deceit used towards Mr. Goldworthy.

He must not be led to believe that he possesses, or *ever can* possess my affections. He must take me, should he care to do so, as the blighted, soulless thing I am; and without a hope that towards him I shall ever change."

"But, consider, my dear Ella——"

"I *have* considered, madam, and my resolution is irrevocable. And now have pity on me, and let me go to my own room, for I can bear no more."

And without awaiting any reply, she threw open the door, and disappeared.

CHAPTER V.

THE LION ROUSED.

A NEW and peremptory summons to Sir Hercules Ashton to pay up the call which had already been made upon him by the Directors of the Cutemclose and Marshfield Railway Company, accompanied by something which savoured of a covert threat should he fail to do so, once more threw the baronet upon a sick bed. Racked with pain, and burnt up by fever; restless alike in mind and body; he writhed and tortured himself into a fiercer paroxysm of gout than any from which he had ever previously suffered. His condition was indeed pitiable; for, superadded to

all his other cares, he had now to dwell upon, and mourn over, the enforced marriage of Horace, which had been duly announced to him by his wife. It is true that he had yielded to her representation of the necessity by which she had been compelled to conclude the preliminaries of the Windermere alliance; but he could not blind himself to the fact that the happiness of two individuals, both of whom were very dear to him, must be sacrificed to his safety. No wonder then that he was tortured both in mind and body, even ignorant as he was of the new and heartless machinations of his wife.

He was lying prostrate, utterly exhausted by bodily and mental suffering, about an hour after the conversation recorded in the last chapter, when Lady Harriette softly entered his room. There was a cold glitter in her eye, and a slight flush in her cheek still, but she had overcome every other evidence of emotion; and as she seated herself beside him, he turned away his head with a gesture of impatient weariness.

“I fear that you are not so well as when I

left you this morning, Sir Hercules ;” she said soothingly.

“ I am as bad as I can be ;” moaned out the baronet ; “ and I see no prospect of amendment.”

“ Nay, nay ; you are depressed by pain, but you must not give way to low spirits ; they will injure you more than even the disease itself.”

“ There is no philosophy in gout ;” said the invalid testily ; “ nor are my thoughts such pleasant companions as to overpower its pangs.”

“ But I bring you news that will I am sure tend to make them less irksome ;” smiled Lady Harriette, as she possessed herself of the hand which was lying on the coverlid ; “ your niece has received a proposal of marriage, and has accepted it.”

“ My niece ! Ella !” exclaimed Sir Hercules, suddenly turning on his pillow and confronting his wife ; “ Who can have proposed to her ?”

“ Mr. Goldworthy.”

“ And you say that she has accepted him ?”

“ I do.”

The baronet lay silent for a moment, evidently overpowered by amazement and annoyance, but at length he spoke; “ Am I to understand ;” he asked sternly ; “ that Ella has of her own free will, and uninfluenced by the advice of others, consented to become the wife of Geoffrey Goldworthy ?”

“ Put the question to herself.”

“ Poor child ! poor child !” murmured Sir Hercules ; “ what could have been her motive ? — But you should have prevented the commission of so egregious an act of folly, my lady ; you should have prevented it ; for you must have been as well aware as myself that, however upright and honourable the man may be, he is not calculated in any way to make her happy ?”

“ I really do not see it ;” was the cold rejoinder.

“ You do not see it ?” echoed the baronet angrily, his gout forgotten in his indignation ; “ I cannot believe that you are serious. Would you have given one of your own daughters to Geoffrey Goldworthy ?”

“He never asked me to do so, my dear Sir Hercules ; and you know that I do not indulge in idle speculations.”

“But what authority have you for saying that Ella wishes to marry him?”

“Her own.”

“What reason did she give?”

“Nay, Sir Hercules ; it must surely be unnecessary to remind you that your niece has never been sufficiently confidential with me to favor me with her reasons for anything that she sees fit to do.”

“Let me at least know what passed between you.”

“Willingly. I was requested by the gentleman to lay his hand and fortune at her feet, which I consented to do ; although, as I frankly confess to you, not without considerable doubt of his success ; but, contrary to my expectations, I was authorised by the lady to tell him that she would accept both.”

“You astonish me !” said the baronet ;
“why, he is almost a stranger to her.”

“I ventured to make the same remark, but

she appeared to consider that circumstance of very little importance."

"Still, it is impossible that she can love him."

"Precisely what I ventured to suggest ; but she did not seem to think that love was a necessary ingredient in matrimony."

"Why the girl must be mad !" angrily exclaimed Sir Hercules.

"Not a whit, my dear ; she is only less romantic than you imagined ; and Goldworthy Hall, with a good income, is worth some sacrifice ; a truth which she has probably discovered."

"I cannot understand it ;" said the baronet uneasily ; "and had she consulted me as she should have done, I never would have consented to her making such a marriage ; but I trust that it is not yet too late to prevent it."

"I would advise you not to interfere, Sir Hercules ; it would be dangerous, under existing circumstances, to make an enemy of Mr. Goldworthy."

"D——n the circumstances, madam ;" almost yelled the invalid. "No circumstances

should or shall induce me to allow my brother's child—the child he confided to my guardianship—to throw herself away upon an upstart plebeian, who would never have presumed to aspire to one of my family had he not known that I was in his power. If we must starve—mark what I say—if through this confounded speculation, in which like a weak fool I have suffered myself to be involved, we must even seek the shelter of another roof, and eat the bread of a strange land—and that would be starvation, body and soul, to an Ashton—we will starve together, and not degrade ourselves by bringing into the family a man who never knew his own grandfather !”

“Well, Sir Hercules, you must do as you think proper ;” said his wife composedly ; “we can, of course, leave the Court as you say, and live abroad for a few years. It will not be pleasant certainly, and will considerably affect your standing in the county ; but still it can be done. Such an arrangement will, however, as a natural consequence, put an end to our son's marriage, as it will be impossible to conceal the motive of our voluntary exile ;

and we cannot for a moment anticipate that the Duke of Windermere will give his daughter to a man who cannot even offer her a home."

The baronet sank back with a smothered groan upon his pillows.

"I confess;" continued Lady Harriette relentlessly; "that I do not consider we should be justified in taking such a step for our children's sake; for while it would seriously injure our daughters, it would be utter ruin to the prospects of Horace. I have already explained to you the unforeseen difficulties with which I have had to contend in the transmission of my father's title; and now that I have ascertained it can only be effected through the Crown, how would it be possible for me to apply for a patent, when I should be compelled to admit that the would-be peer was little better than a pauper?"

"And pray, madam;" asked the baronet; "how can the marriage of my niece avert the necessity of confessing that fact?"

"Did you not a few minutes ago concede that you were in the power of Mr. Goldworthy?"

“And what then?”

“Why then, my dear Sir Hercules, you may rest assured that in his gratification at an alliance with your family, that power will be exerted for your benefit, and not to your injury.”

“I begin to understand;” said the invalid gloomily; “but you have heard my resolution. If Ella does not marry this man because she herself has willed it — and I cannot bring myself to believe that it can be so—she shall never be his wife. Poverty is not dishonour, though it may be hard to bear; and I would rather take a clear conscience into a hovel, than live, degraded in my own eyes, among the noblest in the land. I will have no blighted hearts calling down vengeance on *my* head. My son is already the victim of what I consider to be no better than an insane ambition; for he has consented to barter away the happiness of a whole life for the empty honors of a coronet. That he has done so very reluctantly I am quite convinced; but he has done it, and must abide the consequences. I know—and *you* know—that had he been left free to follow

the dictates of his own heart, he would never have consented to become the husband of Lady Constance Trevor. Let one victim satisfy us."

"Really, Sir Hercules——"

"We will not pursue the subject;" said the baronet; "it *should* be a painful one for both of us."

"No doubt," retorted Lady Harriette bitterly; "the future Earl of Disborough would have been a more eligible husband for your niece than Mr. Goldworthy."

"You are right. More eligible in every sense. Her equal in birth and station; and better still, her equal in education, refinement, and feeling. Nor is that all; in marrying Ella, Horace would have become the husband of the only woman that he has ever loved, or that he ever *will* love. In marrying Lady Constance Trevor, he will go to the altar with a lie upon his lips, and he will leave it a perjured man in his eyes. I, his father, shall be compelled to judge him harshly; and to receive into my family an empty woman of the world, whose parents have sold her for a title."

“ You appear to forget that her own rank is immeasurably above that of your son ; had she been the daughter of a commoner, there might perhaps have been something like reason in what you say.”

“ Not one whit more !” exclaimed the baronet, now thoroughly roused ; “ Do you believe for an instant that I have forgotten my own career in town ; when a mere fox-hunting country gentleman, without any prospect of a coronet, I was hunted in my turn by a host of noble mothers, and establishment-seeking young ladies of fashion ? No, no ; I soon discovered that I was looked upon as a trump-card, and shuffled into the pack as eagerly as though I had borne the same stamp as themselves. It was wonderful to me to discover how many good qualities I possessed, of which I had previously been ignorant ; and it was therefore less surprising to find that Horace, proclaimed as the heir to a peerage, should have been considered so desirable a prize.”

“ Spare your sarcasms, Sir Hercules ;” said his wife, her thin lips actually disappearing under the effort to keep down her anger ;

“Your past career and delusions have nothing whatever to do with the prospects of your son. His marriage is definitively arranged, and so is that of your niece.”

“Not until I have myself conversed with her upon the subject;” was the resolute rejoinder; “I cannot help fearing that she has been led to consider herself as a burthen upon the family under our present circumstances; when, in point of fact, it is to her that we are indebted for having been so long enabled to ward off the blow.”

“No such inference has ever been uttered;” said Lady Harriette with a great display of virtuous indignation; and then, secure in the honour and stability of purpose of the orphan, she added abruptly: “You had better see your niece at once, and convince yourself that she has been unbiassed by any will but her own.”

“Such is my intention;” replied the baronet; “Let her know that I desire to speak with her. Ten minutes will serve to convince me whether I am right or wrong.”

CHAPTER VI.

FAMILY PRIDE AND FAMILY POLITICS.

GREAT was the glorification of Mr. Gold-worthy as he loitered over his breakfast on the following morning with his banking book before him, beside which lay a narrow strip of writing - paper inscribed with innumerable figures. From time to time he paused, and appeared to reflect ; but at the close of each fit of temporary abstraction, he was evidently more and more satisfied with himself and his doings. “ It is of no use ; no use in the world ; ” he at length murmured almost audibly ; “ these fine folks, with their old families, and their old estates, are no match for *us* in the long run. If they trust to their brains, it is ten to one

that their brains serve them at a pinch ; and as to business, they understand no more about it than their own footmen ; and sometimes not half so much. Now here is Sir Hercules Ashton, whose genealogical tree has driven its roots for more than four centuries into the soil, with little more hold upon that self-same soil than if he were leaning upon a sapling of a year's growth ; and my Lord Elwood selling his birth-right for a mess of pottage ; and both fancying that they are entitled to look down upon plain Geoffrey Goldworthy because he is the son of a manufacturer, and follows in his father's footsteps. Well, the world is a queer world enough ; though I have no inclination to quarrel with it, when in spite of all that has happened with this confounded railway, I have one hundred and sixty-five thousand, three hundred and forty pounds twelve shillings and ninepence in my banker's hands, besides floating capital, and stock-in-trade. To be sure I cannot make my wife a countess like her cousin Matilda ; but I may be knighted some day, and make Lady Goldworthy of her in her turn ; while, at all events, she will want for nothing that money

can purchase. Money is a fine thing after all, Geoffrey; a very fine thing. It is wife, and land, and relations, as well as comfort, and credit, and cash. I never quite understood its value before; but luckily for me my father did, and I am very much obliged to him. 'A day or two'—that meant, of course, to-day or to-morrow; so that I shall not be kept long in suspense. I will go to Ashton Court to-morrow. I begin really to like my Lady Disborough; she is a very sensible woman. It will be a pleasure to have such an aunt, and the money she requires will be well laid out; so I will put my cheque-book in my pocket, and relieve her anxiety at once."

And, having formed this doughty resolution, Mr. Goldworthy pushed away his plate, which was still plentifully laden with pigeon-pie, and approaching the fire, established himself comfortably with his back to the white marble mantelpiece, and his hands behind him, to ruminate on his future prospects.

At the same hour, it might even be perhaps at the same moment, Horace Ashton—to whom his mother had triumphantly confided

the fact that his cousin had voluntarily consented to become the wife of their wealthy neighbour—rushed out of the room, and hurried towards the little wood on the edge of which stood the old root-house. Lady Harriette watched him until he was hidden from her sight ; not with any feeling of compunction, however ; for, bent upon one object, she kept her eye steadily fixed on the goal to which her wishes tended, little heeding who might be called upon to tread down the thorns and brambles by which the path thither might be beset—but because she felt indignant that he should still persist in a line of conduct which she considered alike weak and dishonourable in a son of hers. Lady Harriette had very lax and flexible ideas of honour ; a code of her own which lent itself to all emergencies ; and as she never questioned the propriety of her own actions, she was by no means disposed to suffer them to be canvassed by others. *Le roi le veut!* was her motto ; and as it had served her well throughout half a life-time, she felt no inclination to change it.

It was not she who had originated these wretched "calls" which were threatening her husband with bankruptcy. It was not she who had involved her father's affairs in a confusion that was almost inextricable. It was not she who had wrested from her orphan niece the slender portion which would have secured her from utter poverty; nor who had, in the first instance, prompted Mr. Goldworthy to ask her hand. Her conscience was clear upon all these points; and she did not care to remember that in contrast to these negatives, she *had* driven her husband into the speculation which threatened to beggar him; that she *had* increased the disorder of Lord Disborough's estate by her own selfish and reckless ambition; that she *had* suggested the spoliation of Ella, and blinded her husband's judgment by exciting his apprehensions; and that she had finally, without one misgiving as to the consequences of her heartless egotism, worked upon the generous nature of a noble-minded girl, and condemned her to an existence of misery. These were uncomfortable reflections in which she did not suffer herself to

indulge ; and so she went on her way, self-exonerated and self-relying, bending before her will all that would yield, and breaking down all that resisted. She had believed that her son had *ceased* to resist ; and she felt wronged by an outburst of emotion which proved how greatly she had deceived herself ; she was not, moreover, yet aware of what had passed in the interview between Sir Hercules and his niece ; and although confident in the loyalty of Ella, and the readiness with which she would sacrifice herself to the interests of her uncle, she was nevertheless anxious to ascertain the precise nature of the conversation.

On paying her usual morning visit to her husband, she had anticipated at least some allusion to the conference of the preceding day, but the baronet only complained of his gout, of his cold coffee, and of his over-browned toast ; and Lady Harriette was too proud to ask a question. On the other hand, the orphan had sent to excuse herself from joining the breakfast party on the plea of violent head-ache ; and the poor lady had no other

gratification than that of announcing the forthcoming event to her children.

How Horace received the intelligence we have already shown ; and Lady Harriette was still standing near the window, with wrath upon her brow, and a dull glitter in her eye, when the sisters assailed her with exclamations of astonishment and annoyance.

“Such a wretched connection !” sneered Florence, with a shade of her mother’s haughty bitterness ; “It will be enough to disgrace us all over the county. Surely she might have been satisfied to wait until some one better than a Mr. Geoffrey Goldworthy had presented himself.”

“You appear to forget, Miss Ashton ;” said Lady Harriette, all her old displeasure springing once more into life as the disagreeable recollection forced itself upon her ; “that she refused to become the wife of Mr. Frank Hatherston.”

“You need not look so angrily at me, mamma ;” retorted her daughter ; “for to be frank with you, I never quite believed that story. It strikes me that the gentleman was

afraid to commit himself too far, and so left Ashton Court as he had previously done under similar circumstances."

"And I believe nothing of the kind, Florence;" exclaimed Matilda with generous warmth; "Ella would have scorned to sanction, and worse still, to act, a tacit falsehood. You forget besides Mr. Hatherston's letter to papa."

"Did you read the letter?" asked her sister.

"I did not; but Algernon told me that he had seen it, and that nothing could be more frank and manly—while I confess that I am puzzled to conceive how any one who could have married Mr. Hatherston can ever consent to such a substitute as Mr. Goldworthy."

Lady Harriette did not condescend to join any further in the conversation; but, leaving her daughters to discuss the subject as they pleased, she rang for her bonnet and shawl, and walked out into the grounds.

"I think;" said Florence; "that mamma is gone to look for Horace. She is evidently

very much displeased with him, and I am not surprised at it, for he must be mad to give Ella a thought when he can marry the daughter of a duke."

"But if he loves her better;"—urged Matilda, conscious that no duke in England could wean her affections from her affianced suitor.

"Trash!" replied her more worldly sister; "We all know that he will marry Lady Constance at last; but I suppose he considers it sentimental to set himself up as a victim."

"Nay, Florence, you are unjust; and even were you not so, you well know that poor Horace would not speak so ungenerously of you under any circumstances;" said Matilda, with tears standing in her eyes; "I am sure he is sorely tried just now; he told me that he should have been so much more happy to have retained his own family name in the first place; and that in the next, when he came to look back upon his London life, it was unsatisfactory in every way, and not at all suited to his tastes."

"Well," sighed Florence; "he knows best.

I only wish that such an opportunity would fall to my share; for I am sure that when both you and he are married I shall have a dreadful life with mamma, who has never forgiven me for not gaining the affections of Frank Hatherston. She is so unreasonable."

Matilda made no reply; for her conscience would not permit her to utter a dissent. And this was the harvest of feeling which had sprung from the seed sown by a manœuvring and worldly mother.

CHAPTER VII.

A HEROINE.

THE marriage of Matilda was indefinitely postponed. Lady Harriette had resisted the entreaties of her future son-in-law that she would permit it to take place without further delay, as he was anxious—after having made her known to his mother and sisters, from each of whom she had received the kindest assurances of the gratification with which they should welcome her as a new and dear member of their family—to indulge Matilda's wish of exploring some of the countries which she had already learnt to love from his animated descriptions, while the final arrangements for her reception were completed at Elwood Chase. The reason

which her ladyship advanced for this opposition to what was nevertheless the secret wish of her own heart, was the respect due to the memory of her father, for whom the period of mourning had not yet expired ; and her desire, should it be possible to induce the duke and duchess of Windermere to consent to such an arrangement, that the marriage of her son should take place on the same day, and at the same altar, as that of his sister.

It is true, that even accustomed as she was to overlook the fact that some respect was due to Sir Hercules, she still could not conceal from herself that there would be a positive want of decency in forming so close an alliance with a family to which her husband was an utter stranger ; but she had also another, and a more powerful motive for postponing the double ceremony, in the impossibility at that critical moment, of meeting the enormous outlay which would be imperatively necessary for the support of her own dignity on such an occasion. There was an alternative certainly ; and that alternative presented itself in the shape of a third marriage. She had

probed the nature of Mr. Goldworthy deeply ; and she was well aware that an ambition as steady as her own, even if not quite so enterprising, was his besetting weakness. What might he not be prevailed upon to concede, in order to secure the temporary acquaintance of their Graces of Windermere ; to see his name coupled with theirs in the public prints ; to have it made known far and wide that he was closely connected with, if not actually related to, one of the first nobles in the land ; the friend of royalty, and the observed of all observers ? Surely such a privilege might well exact a commensurate return. As regarded the duke and duchess, however, Lady Harriette could not so readily convince herself. They *might* resent the intrusion of a mere country gentleman, of whose very name they would as a necessary consequence be ignorant, in so marked and public a manner, when they were no doubt prepared to impress upon her, as they had already found an opportunity of doing, that they were conscious of their own condescension in giving their daughter to her son, even with the prospects which awaited

him; but still there were several circumstances which led her to believe that even this difficulty might be overcome. In the first place there was the marriage of Matilda to a peer of the realm; a match which they would greedily have coveted for one of their own children; and then Goldworthy Hall, insignificant and *parvenu* though it might be beside Elwood Chase, or Ashton Court, had become one of the "shew-places" of the county; and nothing need be breathed in their hearing of the Manchester manufactory; while it would be easy to whisper into the ear of the duchess that Ella was a poor relation of Sir Hercules, for whom they could not, under the circumstances, anticipate a more brilliant establishment.

This obstacle thus mentally removed, Lady Harriette felt satisfied that she should encounter no further opposition. St. George's, Hanover Square, might be all very well, and the *cortége* of the bride much more splendid should she be married in town; but great names will not always prove an equivalent for great inconvenience; and the duchess would

still have four slenderly-portioned daughters to dispose of after Lady Constance Trevor had become Lady Constance Ashton. There would, moreover, be a certain *éclat* about the double—she would not say even to herself, the *triple*—marriage, which could not fail to create a sensation; and could she only raise the necessary funds, Lady Harriette, to whom experience had not as yet by any means taught wisdom, resolved that she would make the most of an opportunity which never could recur.

Those funds must, however, in the first place be procured; and it was doubtful whether the generosity of Mr. Goldworthy was as accessible as his ambition. He had already consented to make a great sacrifice; the settlement upon Ella was still undecided, and it was difficult to find a pretext for urging any further demand upon his liberality.

It was pitiable to reflect how utterly the newly-made Countess of Disborough had bent her dignity to her necessities; while her husband in his sick room, never for an instant contemplating either subterfuge or compromise of principle, was painfully endeavouring

to convince himself how he might best meet his difficulties without injury to the ultimate interests of his family. To effect any further mortgage upon his estates, he felt to be as impossible as to cut down his ancestral timber; yet something must be done; and after having chafed himself into a fever without arriving at any decision upon the subject, he resolved to consult his faithful and zealous land-steward, and to be guided by his advice.

Warned by the reckless imprudence of Lady Harriette during her late residence in town; and fairly bewildered by her apparent carelessness of the present, and confidence in the future, he had abstained from all conversation with her, since that in which, as we have recorded, she announced to him the projected marriage of his niece. There was a manner about her that he could not comprehend; she no longer sought to carry out her will in the same imperious spirit as formerly; nor did she ostensibly resent the opposition with which he had met several of her measures; and more than he had ever previously done, did he become convinced when

she communicated the unwelcome news of Ella's inexplicable conduct, that there was some mystery which she sought to conceal. That the orphan, after rejecting Frank Hatherston, should desire to unite her fate to that of Mr. Goldworthy, was so utterly beyond belief, that the more he reflected on the subject, the more he felt satisfied that some covert influence had been used to induce her decision; for that she was perfectly decided he could not doubt, after the interview in which he had urged her to reconsider her determination. During that interview the orphan had been calm; and if not precisely cheerful, at least placid and self-possessed. She had disclaimed all idea of sacrifice on her own part; and when reminded by the baronet of the apparent inconsistency of her conduct in declining a very eligible match in order to make another which was objectionable in several ways, she had replied, if not altogether without emotion, still firmly and collectedly: "No one knows better than yourself, my dear uncle, the motives by which I was induced to refuse my hand to the friend of your son. They

have now ceased to exist. I *dare* not longer indulge in a preference for one who is about to become the husband of another. It is my duty, and also my determination, to put it beyond my own power to do so. As the wife of Mr. Goldworthy I shall cease to remember that I ever indulged in a vain and idle dream from which I have now awakened."

"Ella;" had been the rejoinder of Sir Hercules; "are you dealing freely and fairly with me?"

"I trust so, sir."

"Remember, my dear girl, that the whole happiness of your life is at stake, and must not be trifled with."

"I feel with you, my good uncle;" said the orphan; "and I beg you to believe that nothing can conduce to that happiness so much as the marriage which I contemplate."

"Upon your honor, Ella?"

"Upon my honor, sir."

"In that case;" said Sir Hercules with a sigh; "I have, of course, no more to say; but I wish that it had been otherwise."

"Do you know, uncle;" remarked the

orphan with a sad smile ; “ I have learnt to believe that no one of us has any control over his destiny. I am become a perfect Mussulman in my faith upon this point. It is certain that we have latterly exemplified it in our own family ; and it consequently appears to me that the highest human wisdom is to accept one’s fate without repining.”

“ Ella !”

“ Oh, do not mistake me ;” said the poor girl hurriedly ; “ do not imagine that I have expressed this conviction in a repining spirit. Quite the contrary. It appears to me that such a conviction must relieve the mind of a heavy load of responsibility.”

“ It is a very dangerous doctrine, Ella.”

“ If you think so, my dear uncle, I will eschew it ; but it will be like resuming a burthen which I hoped I had thrown off for ever.”

“ These are singular feelings for a girl of your age ; and especially when you have just assured me that your future happiness depends on the marriage which you are about to make.”

“Nay, nay ;” said the orphan, exerting herself to assume a gaiety that was intended to mislead her anxious companion ; “you must not be too hard upon me. I have little time left now for caprice and folly ; but when I am once married, I will compel you to acknowledge that I make a grave and sedate matron enough.”

“Every word you utter renders me more and more dissatisfied with your decision, Ella.”

“I regret deeply that it should do so ;” was the calm reply ; “particularly my dear uncle, as my resolution is immutable.”

“In that case ;” said Sir Hercules, with a cloud upon his brow which it seldom wore when he was alone with his niece ; “we will change the subject, for it is one, I cannot help confessing to you, most unpleasant to me.”

“But you will at least promise to forgive my disobedience to your wishes ?” pleaded Ella.

“I will, my child, although it is strangely and painfully at variance with all my previous experience of your disposition. Still, you either know, or ought to know best. All that I

can do, therefore, is to trust that you will never have cause to repent the step which you are about to take."

"Believe me, my dear kind uncle, when I assure you that I never, never shall;" exclaimed the orphan, as she threw her arms about his neck, and hid her pale face upon his shoulder. "It is impossible."

"So be it then;" said the baronet, returning her embrace; "and now leave me, Ella, for I have important business on my hands which will require all my attention; and this conversation has somewhat agitated me."

Ella pressed her lips upon his hand, and glided from the room. Her heaviest trial was over. How often during that short interview had she longed to cast herself on her knees before the good old man, and to pour out all the agony of her spirit; to confess that Horace was even yet the object of her deepest and dearest love; but that, without the sacrifice which she was about to make, he himself, and that Horace so soon to be lost to her for ever, must be plunged into inextricable difficulties, exposed to mortification, and "all the

ills that (poverty) is heir to," while her hand alone could ward off the stroke ; but the words were denied utterance, the panting heart had crushed back its throbs, and the secret was kept ; even amid the bitterness of feeling that she had disappointed the wishes, and disregarded the will, of the only untired and untiring friend that she possessed on earth.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PEER BY PATENT.

HORACE had, as we have said, hurried from the house on learning the decision of the orphan. Never until that moment had he thoroughly realised the fact that all hope of ever obtaining her hand was indeed over; and that thenceforward they would be nothing to each other beyond mere relatives. Strangely enough, he had not dwelt upon the thought of his own marriage with Lady Constance, which appeared to him as a mere dream; a night-mare from which he should be liberated on awaking; for never having personally given her cause to imagine that he regarded her in any other light than that of a pleasant

friend, whose accomplishments he appreciated, and whose society he valued, he could not, or would not, consider himself bound by a pledge given in his name by another, even although that other might be his own mother. He had, moreover, faith in time—when does youth ever fail to feel it?—and he asked himself bitterly why Ella had not shared that faith. Had he not assured her more than once since his return home that it was impossible he could love again; and that a firm resistance to Lady Harriette's will would yet enable him to liberate himself from the shackles which she had thrown around him? Why then had she not trusted to his word? But now, she had voluntarily given him up—and for whom?

For a man unsuited alike by birth, education, and habits, to such a nature as hers. How would it all end?

In short, Horace was miserable; and the young peer-elect, the envy of half the men of his acquaintance, and the admiration of all the women, threw himself down under a tree, careless for the moment whether he should ever rise from the earth again.

Thus was he found by Lady Harriette, who, as her daughters had surmised, had gone forth in search of him; and never had the presence of his mother been less welcome.

“What is the meaning of your very extraordinary conduct this morning, Horace?” she asked sternly, as she stopped before him; “Am I to understand that the approaching marriage of your cousin has occasioned the burst of temper in which you have indulged? If so, you must allow me to remark that a more unbecoming exhibition I have never witnessed; and that I blush for my own son?”

“Mother;” said the young man firmly; “since I left the house I have had time for reflection; and now I ask you in my turn why you have not been satisfied with one victim? (for that Ella is the victim of her own over-wrought ideas of duty, I am as certain as though I could read her heart)—What means you have used to induce her to sacrifice her happiness to the interests of our family? And why you have driven her into a marriage which you must be well aware can entail upon her nothing but misery?”

“You pay me a high compliment, Mr. Horace Ashton;” said Lady Harriette; “when you suppose that any influence of mine would be powerful enough to determine the actions of your father’s niece. Neither fear nor love exists between us; and it would require either one or the other to work so great a miracle. For my own part, I think that your cousin has displayed great prudence—a prudence, indeed, almost wonderful at her age—in securing for herself a home of luxury and comfort at the very period when our own is about to become comparatively one of privation and sacrifice.”

“Mother!” exclaimed Horace, starting to his feet; “You do not, you know that you do not believe what you wish me to infer.”

“Can you oblige me with a more probable solution of the enigma?” asked Lady Harriette contemptuously.

“I think I can—I am sure that I can;” was the excited reply; “our present involvements are the occult cause of her unfortunate resolution; although how they are to be affected by such a generous self-sacrifice, I am

compelled to acknowledge that I do not comprehend."

"That is at least fortunate;" retorted his mother, in the same irritating tone in which she had last spoken; "And now, will you do me the favour to explain by whom, and how, you suppose Miss Ella Ashton to have been led or driven into her present purpose?"

"I have just stated my inability to do so;" said Horace dejectedly; "but my conviction is not the less firm on that account. No one better knows the nature and feelings of my cousin than myself; and I repeat what I have already said, that Ella would never have consented to become the wife of such a man as Mr. Goldworthy had she not been prompted by some motive perfectly independent of self."

"You had better ask her the question."

The young man started as though an asp had stung him. His mother was indeed pitiless; and he could not trust himself to reply.

"One thing is certain;" pursued Lady Harriette, regardless of the look of indignation which he turned upon her; "that you would

be more properly and more profitably employed in advancing your own marriage than in interfering with that of your cousin. I am weary of making excuses for you to the Duchess of Windermere; while you appear to have totally overlooked the fact that if we ever obtain the royal sanction to your accession to the Disborough peerage, you will owe it in a great degree to the influence of the duke with His Majesty."

Still Horace remained silent.

"I would also beg you to remember that you are by your wrong-headedness delaying the marriage of your sister;" continued the countess, more and more irritated by the position which her son had assumed; and far from convinced that the assertion which he had made regarding his cousin had not a more solid foundation than mere conjecture; "that you are hindering the interests of your father when it is your duty to help them; and that you are sacrificing your whole family to your own selfishness."

"Mother;" said her son at length; "You are well aware that neither by word or deed

have I ever sought to win the affections of Lady Constance Trevor, and that I have given no pledge even to yourself that I would make her my wife. It is true that you extorted from me, in a moment of deep and painful emotion, an exclamation which you have led me to believe you considered as such ; and you have assured my father that I was a consenting party ; but I feel convinced that were the duke and duchess to be frankly told the state of my affections, and the present position of my family, they would refuse to sanction my marriage with their daughter."

"Are you mad, sir?" exclaimed Lady Harriette vehemently ; "or do you seek to make me so ? I will bear with no more of this folly. I will not suffer you, or any person breathing, to compromise me with my friends, or to frustrate my plans. I have your promise ; you shall fulfil it, or Ashton Court is no longer a home for you ; and I leave you to decide on the effect which a rupture with your parents at such a moment as the present will produce upon the world."

"I should care far less for the opinion of

the world ;” said the young man moodily ; “ than for the hateful consciousness that I was the pensioner of my wife.”

“ Absurd !” sneered his mother, though her cheek grew a shade paler as she spoke ; “ Were you destined to continue so through life there might be some reason in such an argument, but situated as you are it is ridiculous ; and but a poor and transparent veil intended to conceal your real motives.”

At this period of the conversation a servant was seen approaching, with a large packet upon a salver, which he presented to the countess who hastily tore it open.

“ This ;” she said exultingly ; “ decides the question ; and there need be no further argument upon the subject. The patent is granted ; and you are summoned to town to kiss hands on your accession to the peerage. Lord Disborough, allow me to be the first to congratulate you on your new rank.”

Horace felt as though he were in a dream ; his mother was in one brief moment changed in voice, look, and manner. A proud light flashed in her eye ; the crimson blood mounted

to her cheek ; and her thin lips were parted with a gracious smile. As he took her extended hand a thousand thoughts flashed across his mind. He was summoned to town to invest himself with honors for which he was indebted to her alone—to town, where he could not escape collision with Lady Constance, who, should he now refuse to confirm the promise made in his name, would not fail to impute to him the most unworthy motives. He was fairly in the toils ; and as the mother and son slowly made their way back to the house, he could scarcely command himself sufficiently to reply even briefly to her self-congratulatory comments and anticipations.

CHAPTER IX.

LANDLORD AND STEWARD.

“COME in, Saunders ; come in, and take a seat ;” said the baronet, as his trusty steward appeared upon the threshold of his private room : “I have sent for you upon some disagreeable business, but as it must be got through with, the sooner it is arranged the better.”

“I was in hopes, Sir Hercules, that the business to which I suppose you to allude was already settled.”

“No, Saunders ;” replied the old gentleman with a heavy sigh : “such is far from being the case. You and I little expected a year or two back, my good friend, that we

should see the Ashton property melting away from our grasp as it is doing now. Do you remember, Saunders, what it cost me to dispose of the Willow Farm? Little did I think that it was but the first brick which was to render the whole building unstable."

"The Farm will, however, if what I have heard is correct, come back as it were into the family, Sir Hercules;" said the man of business.

"Ah you allude I suppose to the marriage of my niece;" said the baronet gloomily: "I would rather have recovered it by any other means; but young girls have strange fancies; and as Ella is not my own child, I do not feel justified in contradicting her on so serious a subject."

"But under the circumstances, Sir Hercules, you could surely induce Mr. Goldworthy to advance you a loan on your personal security. He well knows that it is as good as the Bank; and he is a warm man, sir, if all I hear be true."

"That may be, and I have no doubt *is* the

case, Saunders ; but you must remember that our neighbour's commercial habits are not likely to lead him to appreciate personal security so highly as yourself ; and, even were it otherwise, I should shrink from applying to him at this moment. There will be comments enough made in the county on the alliance of the Ashtons with a mere manufacturer ; and should I permit myself to lie under a money-obligation to him at such a time, motives might be imputed to me which I could not brook, and should perhaps be unable to refute."

"True, sir ; true ;" said Saunders, as he gazed admiringly on the high-spirited old man ; "and spoken like an Ashton. No, we cannot afford to level ourselves with the like of him. But I beg pardon, Sir Hercules. It does not become me to give an opinion on any such subject."

"Make no apology, my good friend ;" said the baronet ; "I know your zeal for me and my family ; and that what touches me nearly, touches you also. However, let us to business. I have immediate need of two thousand

pounds; and you must tell me how it can be raised."

The steward twirled his hat uneasily for a moment, then smoothed down the nap with his elbow, and finally combed his hair through with his fingers, before he ventured on a reply; but at last it came.

"This is a bad business, Sir Hercules;" he said slowly: "a very bad business. I can't see my way through it."

"Nor I, Saunders."

"I shouldn't say sell, sir; we have sold too much already; and as to another mortgage, it seems to me to be almost as bad."

"Then what *can* be done?" asked the baronet nervously.

"Well, sir, I can only propose one thing; but I am afraid that neither you nor my lady will agree to it."

"And that is—?"

"You have a fine income, Sir Hercules. Eleven thousand a-year is a fine income."

"You forget, Saunders, that it has been greatly reduced by our recent transactions."

"True, sir, I had forgotten that for the

moment ; but still many an ancient family has kept up its dignity with much less than what remains to you. Now, sir, it is my firm advice, if you *must* sink anything, that you sink a portion of your income."

"Lady Harriette will never consent to such an arrangement."

"Then, Sir Hercules, I do not see what is to be done."

"Saunders;" said the baronet in an unsteady voice ; "I wish I had listened to your advice, for I begin to fear that this detested railway will be the ruin of my family ; still, however that may be, I must meet the call they have now made upon me ; and trust to time for the result."

"The railway call, Sir Hercules?"

"Precisely."

"Why, there must surely be some mistake somewhere;" said the steward, rather speaking to himself than addressing his master ; "Have you talked with my lady about it, sir?"

"I have, but we could come to no decision."

“May I ask when the conversation took place, Sir Hercules?”

“About a week ago, I think—I cannot remember the precise day.”

“Then all’s right, sir ; for when I saw her ladyship this morning she told me that the matter was arranged, and that the money would be paid in shortly.”

Sir Hercules was aghast ; his very lips turned white ; and a feeling of sickness grew upon him as he felt that he had at length penetrated the mystery which had hitherto baffled him. He remained silent for several minutes ; and then, making a violent effort to control himself, he said in a hard, determined voice :

“Lady Harriette is mistaken ; we have failed to procure it. Saunders——”

“Sir Hercules.”

“Mark out some of the timber for felling. I leave it to your discretion—only respect the avenue.”

“The timber, Sir Hercules?”

“You have heard me. Neither my son nor I can put our oaks and elms in competition with our honour.”

“But are you quite sure, Sir Hercules——”

The baronet waved his hand deprecatingly. He could bear no more.

The steward rose to withdraw, but he had scarcely reached the door when he retraced his steps; and stopping opposite his master, whose head had sunk upon his breast as though he were thoroughly exhausted by some mighty effort, he said resolutely:

“Not a tree shall be felled on the Ashton lands, not a branch shall be lopped, while Joseph Saunders can lift up his voice to oppose it. Do I not know right well that every stroke of the axe would drain a drop of your heart’s blood as well as my own? Look you, Sir Hercules, I and mine have served your family for three generations; we owe all that we have, and all that we are, to you and yours, and I have a right to act in such a case as this. I have neither wife nor child, and have grown what my little world calls rich in your service. Sell the timber if you *must* do it to raise this money, and I will purchase it; but, sir, I will purchase it standing, and it shall be left standing; I want no sapless

logs—what should I do with them? I will buy trees only—trees that I can remember from my boyhood, and which I should miss in my old age;—and when you and Mr. Horace begrudge me my bargain, and wish to do so, you may buy them back again. Good day, Sir Hercules.”

And before the baronet could recover his surprise, or utter one expostulation, Saunders was gone.

And then some among us dare to talk of a cold-hearted world!

One thing at least is certain; that the invalid derived far more comfort and gratification from his interview with his faithful and devoted steward, than from a subsequent one with his wife; in which she informed him that his own son no longer bore his name, and that a great gulf had opened between them, as he feared, for ever. To her this was matter of exceeding triumph, but it was gall and wormwood to the proud old man; who, although he had not condescended to expostulate, felt mortified that any son of his should have resigned his birthright to accept that of

another. He was consoled, however, when Horace in his turn sought his chamber, and without a word flung himself upon his bosom, rather like a culprit suing for pardon, than a successful candidate for worldly honours seeking congratulation.

“My poor boy!” murmured the baronet, as he pressed him to his heart; “I scarcely know what to say to you; I can only pray that the event which partially robs me of a son may at least ensure his own happiness. Do not think me selfish, Horace, when I confess to you that I did hope your mother’s plans might fail; I could not help it; I am too old for ambition; and it seems to me that the sacredness of the tie which has hitherto bound us together is fearfully loosened by what has taken place. I am wrong, perhaps, to murmur at what some fathers would have gloried in; but I cannot help it. My love for you may not have been so demonstrative as that of Lady Harriette, but I believe that it has been much deeper; for I have loved you for yourself, and done justice—or, at least, I trust so—to your filial affection, and many estimable qualities. I tell you

this, Horace, because I believe that it will give you pleasure to receive such an assurance, and it is therefore a duty which I owe to you ; all the more indeed, that by my culpable weakness I have most unintentionally wronged you."

" My dear father !"

" Nay, hear me out, my son. You are the first Ashton who will ever have succeeded to a trammelled and depreciated estate ; and when I reflect that I have been the cause of this, and that the new title which has been thrust upon you, will only render your position the more onerous, it almost breaks my heart."

" Father ;" said the young man as he slowly raised his head, and gazed reverently into the venerable and grief-stricken face of the baronet ; " do not waste a thought upon the subject. I have submitted, almost without a murmur, to the will of my mother, for I believed that it was my duty to do so ; but had I suspected for a moment that my obedience was to entail any estrangement between my father and myself, I would have resisted to the death. What have I gained ? A name which I do not value, and which I can never

honour as I honour that which I derived from you ; while, on the other hand, you have made a great and heavy sacrifice to secure it to me. Oh, sir, were it only privation and anxiety which await me, how cheerfully and hopefully could I endure both ; but you know too well——”

“ I do—I do, my poor boy ;” interposed Sir Hercules hastily ; “ I *do* know only too well to what you allude ; but if you are compromised, Horace, as a man of honour you must redeem your word.”

His son heard him in silence. How could he suffer himself to assure his stricken parent that the ill-omened marriage which awaited him was but another result of his mother’s crooked and heartless policy ? He felt it to be impossible ; and for a time they sat together in silence, the hand of the baronet clasped in that of his son, and both buried in deep and painful thought.

The coronet weighed heavily already.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW SPECULATION.

“HORACE ;” at length exclaimed the baronet abruptly ; “ I have just instructed Saunders to dispose of some of the timber ; and it has suddenly occurred to me that I did so without your sanction.”

“ Sir ;” exclaimed his son with a start ; “ whatever you have done, you have done wisely and well. I have neither the right nor the wish to interfere.”

“ I thank you, my boy, for your confidence in me ; and the rather that I feared it must have been somewhat shaken of late,” said Sir Hercules tremulously ; “ I will not, however, enter further into the subject to-day, as you

have already sufficient to occupy your thoughts ; nor have I myself energy enough to discuss it. When do you start for Town ?”

“ I am in no hurry ;” replied the young man gloomily.

“ I can believe it, Horace ; but you are no longer a free agent. You have (as your mother informs me) been summoned by His Majesty ; and you must obey that summons without delay.”

“ But the means, my dear father ?”

“ They shall be found. It is too late to recede ; and we have only to meet our difficulties as we best may. In any case, your wants must be provided for.”

“ This is terrible !” murmured the unhappy young man.

“ Nay, nay ;” said the baronet, striving to rally : “ you should not don the ermine with such a rueful countenance, my dear boy. Who can foresee the career which is before you ? Yours is an exceptional position ; but I have no fear that you will do dishonour to your race and name.”

“ *Apropos* of position ;” observed Horace ;

"I have this morning received a letter from Frank Hatherston which I have not yet opened. I am glad that he has remembered us at last."

As he spoke he broke the seal, and began eagerly to run his eye along the well-known writing.

"Why this is news indeed!" he exclaimed, as he reached the bottom of the first page; "Frank writes to tell me, sir, that he has lost his uncle; who, unaware that his marriage with—that Ella had—in short that—" he struggled an instant for firmness, and then continued; "that he had no immediate prospect of taking a wife, has bequeathed to her——"

"Nothing that she shall accept," broke in the baronet.

"Thank you, sir, for that assurance;" said his son with a heightened colour; "I should have felt pained had you decided otherwise."

"And what of Hatherston himself?" asked Sir Hercules.

"He appears to feel his loss very severely;"

was the reply ; “and the rather that he is now, as he declares, alone in the world, without an interest or a care for the future.”

“Poor fellow ! He has begun his troubles early. What is he about to do with himself?”

“He talks of travelling ;” said Horace, reverting to the letter ; “but says that he despairs of finding excitement even in travel ; his path through life having, according to all human seeming, been made too smooth to him. He has inherited thirty thousand a year from his uncle.”

“A nabob, indeed !” said the baronet. “He could scarcely have been prepared for so colossal a fortune.”

“I believe not, but he says little about it beyond mentioning the bare fact. He is at present in Town, where he expects to be detained for some time on business ; and urges me to join him.”

“And what does your own inclination dictate ?”

“I will be frank with you, my dear father ; and confess that it would be a great relief to

me if I could make the journey unaccompanied by my mother."

"And to me also;" said Sir Hercules; "but still I would impress on you, Horace, the absolute necessity of great circumspection in your intercourse with the Duke of Windermere's family, should the ladies unfortunately be in Town; for you must not for an instant overlook the fact that, whether through your own agency or that of Lady Harriette, you are decidedly compromised."

"Mine is at once a painful and a ridiculous dilemma," said his son; "but should you approve my intention, I will explain my predicament to Hatherston, and hear what he says upon the subject. I can present him to the duchess, and he will then be able to form his own judgment; while it may even prove that Her Grace has been induced to form other views for her daughter."

"In that case;" said Sir Hercules; "your mother would, I feel satisfied, have been already apprised of the fact; as from what I could gather of the understanding existing between the two ladies, no extraordinary

amount of delicacy had been exhibited on either side; and it is consequently certain that even less would be observed should the one or the other deem it expedient to retract her word. To be candid with you, Horace, my sense of dignity was wounded by the whole affair; but it was too late to expostulate when the mischief was done. Do not therefore buoy yourself up with any such hope, for rely on it that it will prove fallacious."

"You do not, at all events, object to my taking Hatherston into my confidence?"

"By no means; I have a high opinion both of his judgment and his principles; but I fear, my dear boy, that he will give a verdict against you."

The sigh was a heavy one with which the young man listened. "I have, in such a case, only one request to make, sir:" he said with a quivering lip and an unsteady voice; "If by what the world calls honor, I find myself compelled to ratify the pledge given by my mother, will you spare me at least one pang?"

"Explain yourself, Horace."

"The marriage, sir,—the marriage of my

cousin — can it not take place during my absence? I could not—indeed I could not undergo the trial of—”

“Calm yourself, my poor boy;” said the baronet soothingly; “I am not at liberty to explain my meaning even to you, but I have a strong hope that I shall be enabled to prevent that marriage.”

The effect of this assurance upon his son fairly alarmed Sir Hercules; his emotion was almost uncontrollable; he threw himself upon his father’s neck, and wept—wept those agonising tears which rend the heart of manhood, and whose traces are never entirely obliterated from the spirit—Ella might never be his, but to have seen her the wife of such a man as Mr. Goldworthy would have been torture to him; and, much as he had suffered, never had he recognised the full weight of the misery by which he was overwhelmed at such a prospect, until partially liberated from it by the words to which he had just listened. He believed at that moment that he could bear every other evil without repining; and when he had gradually become more calm, he no longer

hesitated to pledge himself to such a line of conduct towards Lady Constance and her family as the baronet should approve.

The contents of Frank Hatherston's letter were communicated to Lady Harriette, who learnt them with a deep feeling of mortification; and again the old hatred of Ella rose to the surface; while, if one lingering feeling of compunction had still resisted all her efforts to banish it as she remembered the fearful sacrifice which she had exacted of the helpless girl, it was silenced for ever as she remembered how amply she should ere long be revenged. She did not, however, by any means discountenance the project of Horace to accept the invitation of his friend. A close intimacy with the possessor of thirty thousand a-year could not, as she at once felt, but prove advantageous to her son; but it was nevertheless very far from her intention to suffer him to proceed to Town alone. Ten minutes had not elapsed since the letter of Hatherston had been communicated to her, before she had entangled herself in a perfect web of projects and possibilities; the last and brightest of which

represented his return to Ashton Court and his allegiance to Florence.

She dared not confide her hopes to Horace, and trust to his exertions in behalf of his sister, for she had a very unpleasant suspicion that she had already in a great degree forfeited his respect and affection by her efforts to secure his own aggrandisement ; while she had firm confidence in her own powers of diplomacy, and never doubted for an instant that, could she only command the opportunity, she should soon wile back the startled bird to its cage.

Frank admitted that his isolation weighed upon him ; and that he had abandoned all care and interest in the future. How welcome therefore must be words of friendship and kindness—old affection and old kindness—which could not fail to call up pleasant memories of the past to one so situated ; and how potent must be their effect !

Matilda married to a peer, Florence to one of the richest commoners in England, and her son to the daughter of a duke, even Lady Harriette felt that she should not have lived

quite in vain ; and thus she soon decided that it *must* be ; while to her it also appeared imperatively necessary that she should herself present the newly-made peer to Lady Constance in the character of her affianced husband.

Flushed with hope, and radiant with a sense of self-importance which she seldom suffered to appear quite so conspicuously, the mistress of Ashton Court had no sooner matured her plans than she hastened to communicate a portion of them to her husband. Of her designs upon Frank Hatherston she wisely determined to say nothing.—Sir Hercules had not energy enough to appreciate their importance, or to assist in their development—but it was necessary that he should be made acquainted with her intended journey to Town, and the hope which she entertained of inducing “the dear duchess” to consent to the marriage of her daughter taking place at Ashton Court.

“It was not my original intention ;” she said in conclusion ; “to accompany Lord Disborough ; but on mature reflection I have decided to do so, as I consider that it will be more dignified.”

“I am sorry to say ;” was the cold reply of the baronet ; “that you will be obliged on this occasion to sacrifice dignity to expediency. It is utterly impossible that you should undertake such a journey at present.”

“And wherefore?”

“Simply, my lady, because I have not funds to meet such expenses as you contract in Town. Even as it is, I have been compelled to authorise Saunders to dispose of some of the park timber in order to satisfy the claim made upon me by the Directors of the railway.”

“In that case, my dear Sir Hercules ;” said his wife, recovering her temper as if by magic : “We have ample funds ; as I have myself succeeded in raising money to meet that demand.”

“Will you allow me to inquire in what manner?”

“Oh, that is *my* secret !” laughed her ladyship : “You have nothing to do in the business, except to profit by my cleverness. Be satisfied with the assurance that no claim whatever will be made upon you from that quarter for some time to come.”

“ I must nevertheless insist upon an explanation ;” said the baronet sternly ; “ I have too long consented to be considered as a mere cypher in my own house, and I am weary of the part that I have played. Where did you procure this money ?”

Lady Harriette was visibly disconcerted. She had flattered herself that her husband, too happy to be released from all further anxiety, would accept her own version of the affair, and ask no questions ; but she instantly detected in his manner a determination and self-assertion of which she had long ceased to consider him capable. She did not for one moment dream that he could suspect his niece to be involved in the question before them, or she would have understood at once that he would permit no personal suffering to affect the sacredness of his guardianship of his brother’s child ; and she consequently replied with all the haughtiness she could assume :

“ You adopt a singular tone, Sir Hercules ; and whatever I might have been induced to concede to your courtesy, I absolutely refuse

to an attempt at authority as unbecoming as it is misplaced. I shall give you no information whatever upon the subject."

"As you please;" was the calm rejoinder; "I believe that it is by no means necessary."

And while speaking, he laid his hand upon the bell-rope.

"What are you about to do, Sir Hercules?" asked Lady Harriette, suddenly rising from her seat, and speaking in an accent of irrepressible alarm.

"That is *my* secret;" was the unmoved reply; and as a servant appeared at the door, he added in the same unimpassioned tone: "Tell Miss Ella Ashton that I wish to see her immediately."

Scarcely knowing what she feared, Lady Harriette made a movement to leave the room, but suddenly changed her resolution. If Sir Hercules indeed suspected that the diplomacy of which she had just boasted had any connexion with the marriage of his niece, her presence during the forthcoming interview, however trying to herself, might operate as a check upon the revelations of Ella. She

could not bring herself to believe that the poor girl so hopelessly in her power would dare to betray her ; and she accordingly reseated herself, and even took up a book which chanced to lie upon the table near her, as if to impress upon her husband her total want of interest in what was to follow ; but strive as she would to conceal her uneasiness, it was still sufficiently evident to Sir Hercules to convince him that he had done her no injustice ; and not another word passed between the husband and wife until the door again opened, and Ella entered the room.

CHAPTER XI.

A RELEASE.

“THANK you, my dear girl, for your prompt compliance with my summons ;” said the baronet, as after a rapid glance around her the orphan made her way to his side ; “I have sent for you to relieve your mind of a heavy weight, and to prove to you that I was worthy of the confidence which was reposed in me by your father.—You told me, Ella, during our last interview ;” he pursued after a brief pause, taking her hand kindly in his own ; “that your future happiness depended on your marriage with Mr. Goldworthy : I was startled at the time, as you may remember, by such an assurance ; but I did not wish to wound your

feelings by any undue assumption of authority. You were to blame, my dear child, to make such an assertion."

"But I assure you, uncle——"

"Answer me, Ella, before you venture upon any further protestations.—Was it not because you hoped that your self-sacrifice would ensure the happiness of others?"

"Surely, Sir Hercules;" interposed Lady Harriette with a warning glance at her victim; "your niece is now old enough, and ought to be rational enough to decide for herself, and to understand her own feelings."

"I do not dispute so obvious a fact;" said the baronet; "and had she been permitted to do so, I should have been spared a very unpleasant duty. As it is, however, I must fulfil it; but I will be as brief as possible for all our sakes."

"Pray do not inconvenience yourself on my account at least;" sneered Lady Harriette, as she resumed her book; "I am not aware of any immediate demand upon my time; and, even were it otherwise, the conversation pro-

mises to be so edifying that I should regret not being present.

“I have little, very little to say to you, Ella;” pursued Sir Hercules, disregarding the interruption of his wife; “only this; that as I most positively decline to become the debtor of Mr. Goldworthy, your marriage with that gentleman can in no way whatever affect my interests, or those of my family. Do you still wish to become his wife?”

The orphan turned a terrified look upon Lady Harriette, but she met no answering glance. Her aunt had fallen back in her chair, the picture of consternation and dismay; and was evidently unable to articulate a syllable.

“Have I made myself clearly understood?” asked the baronet, after awaiting several minutes in vain the reply of his niece; “So far from desiring this marriage, Ella, I will not conceal from you that the very thought of it is repugnant to me. So far from consenting to incur an obligation to such a man, I would abandon the very home of my fathers to the hammer. He should not, he *shall* not mingle

his plebeian blood with that of the Ashtons ; and understand without further preface, that if it was for my sake that you were about to unite your fate with his, I spurn the sacrifice as one unworthy alike of me and of yourself. Do you still wish to become his wife?"

"Oh, no! oh, no! my dear kind uncle—my more than father;" exclaimed the poor girl, sinking to her knees, and burying her face upon those of the agitated old man ; "Never—never—may blessings light upon you for having saved me from such a fate!"

"You see your work, madam;" said Sir Hercules, as he turned sternly towards his wife.

"I see both that and your weakness; your pitiable weakness;" was the retort: "I exacted from a dependent no more than it was her duty to concede. Who is Miss Ella Ashton that she should place her own caprice in competition with the welfare of those by whom she has been sheltered and fed?"

"Enough, madam, enough—" said the baronet vehemently; "I am not alluding to the conduct of this poor, persecuted girl, but to

your own. You have brought a foul stain upon your husband's name, and one which he is never likely to forget. You have already robbed me in some degree of my son, and involved my estate ; but you shall never sell my niece to a trader for your own selfish purposes."

"You must arrange the matter yourself with Mr. Goldworthy, Sir Hercules ;" said Lady Harriette, with a withering light in her eye, and a smile of defiance upon her lips ; "He has already received my own promise, and that of Miss Ella Ashton. I will interfere no further in the affair."

"And you will be right ;" was the calm reply ; "the matter can be easily arranged without interference on your part. Neither the one nor the other—the first as my wife, nor the second as my ward—had any right to make such a promise without my sanction and authority ; and I refuse both."

"Sir Hercules Ashton !" exclaimed his wife petulantly ; "you appear to forget——"

"I have forgotten nothing. It was you, madam, who in making such an engagement, forgot our relative positions. Enough, how-

ever, as I have already said, on this subject. You have heard my determination."

"The money is already in my possession;" said Lady Harriette doggedly; "and there is consequently no possibility of retracting."

"You are mistaken upon that point;" was the calm reply; "you must restore it upon the instant: and I will myself explain to its owner that I disapprove of the whole transaction, from its first detail to its last."

And again seizing the bell-rope, which he nearly tore down in his angry indignation, the baronet gave orders that a mounted groom should be at the door in ten minutes, to carry a letter to Goldworthy Hall.

"You may spare both man and beast on the present occasion;" said Lady Harriette; "as I expect Mr. Goldworthy here shortly, to receive the final reply of Miss Ella Ashton."

"He shall have it from *my* lips;" thundered Sir Hercules; "and now, madam, as I conceive that it would be by no means pleasant to yourself to meet the gentleman in question under existing circumstances it only

remains for you to transfer to me the sum for which you would have bartered away the happiness of this poor orphan girl."

"And pray, Sir Hercules;" demanded his wife, exasperated beyond endurance; "where am I to find the funds necessary for our expenses in Town?"

"You are not going to Town, madam; and I will provide for the wants of my son."

"I am glad that you have at last explained yourself clearly, Sir Hercules;" was the reply: "I now understand your whole purpose. You would prevent my compelling Lord Disborough to act like a man of honour—and Mr. Goldworthy from marrying your niece—in order to carry out your delectable project of ultimately uniting them. You shall not succeed, however; for since it appears that this money is necessary to the completion of my own views, I will not return it."

"As you please;" said the baronet; "I will at least do *my* duty; and I have little doubt that when I have once resolutely refused my brother's child to Mr. Goldworthy, and informed him that I will not be respon

sible for any sum or sums which he may have paid over to you in the hope of obtaining her hand, he will be as anxious to recover his loan as I shall be to restore it."

"But it was not a loan;" imprudently interposed his wife.

The large-hearted old man clutched the arms of his chair so tightly that his fingers grew white from the violence of the pressure; while with his eyes riveted upon those of Lady Harriette, he hissed out in a sort of shuddering whisper to which it was terrible to listen:

"Ha, indeed! It was then a *bona fide* sale? I had not thought so ill of you, madam. Had you overlooked the fact that we have no slave-markets in our free country? Now, shame, shame on the selfish thought which led you to consent to such a compact; for I will not, *dare* not think that the suggestion was your own. I will endeavour to forget it; while you will do well to follow my example. — And you, my poor child!" he added, as he laid his hand upon the head of the orphan; "may I hope that you also will

be generous enough to forgive the outrage which was meditated against you?"

"As I myself hope to be forgiven;" murmured Ella solemnly; "and even now, should it indeed be necessary to secure your comfort——" she paused; spiritually she felt that she should have strength to redeem the pledge which she was about to give; but still her human nature, in all its weakness, would assert itself; and the words that she sought to utter became inaudible. She could not set the seal on her own misery.

"Thank you, my dear child; from my soul I thank you;" said Sir Hercules; "for I have had proof that you would not hesitate for an instant to sacrifice your happiness to mine;—but not only is it not necessary, Ella, as I have already sufficiently proved by repudiating what I then considered only as a loan, and loathed even under that shape; and which I now spurn with tenfold more indignation as a gift,—but I most positively declare to you, that if you accept that man as a husband, and bring the taint of trade into the Ashton family, I will never see you again while I live. And

now, madam, I would ask ;” he pursued, turning towards his wife ; “ if you still purpose to hold back the money in your possession ?”

“ No, sir ;” replied Lady Harriette : “ I have no such intention. Destroy alike yourself and your family if you see fit to do so, in so far at least as it is in your power. I shall throw myself upon the gratitude and duty of my son ; who, even hampered as the Disborough estates are at this moment, will not I believe find it impossible to raise money upon his expectations.”

As she spoke she drew out her pocket-book, and took from it a cheque which she threw upon the table.

Sir Hercules examined it carefully, and as he did so the hot blood flashed over his cheeks and forehead ; then he refolded it, and placed it in the pocket of his waistcoat ; nor was it until he had thus secured the, to him, hateful document, that he replied to the observation of his wife.

“ You are quite right ;” he said, even more sternly than he had hitherto spoken : “ bank

rupt as he is, I do not doubt that Horace might be enabled to place himself in the hands of the Jews, and derive a present existence from his future ruin; but this,—mark me, my lady,—he shall never do. From this house he stirs not, until he has solemnly pledged his honour never to sacrifice his principles to his necessities.”

“And you imagine, Sir Hercules, that I will submit to this?”

“You have no alternative. You must abide the consequences of your acts; and should be the last to repine at privations proceeding from your own improvidence.”

“We shall see!” exclaimed Lady Harriette, as she swept haughtily across the floor, and left the room.

“And *feel*”—emphatically added the baronet; “And now, leave me in your turn, my poor girl; this miserable scene of altercation has exhausted us both; and we need rest.”

“I do indeed deplore it, my dear, dear uncle;” sobbed the orphan, for the first time suffering her tears to flow unchecked; “and yet I am sadly selfish, for even while you are

in grief, I am so very, very happy, that I tremble at the excess of my own joy."

"Then I will grieve no more, Ella," said Sir Hercules soothingly; "I am sure of your love, and that of Horace; I trust that my girls have also some affection for their old father; and I must learn to forget that I ever hoped for more.—Do not cease to respect your aunt, Ella; but remember whenever you feel disposed to judge her harshly, that she was led into the grave error of which she has been guilty by her over-weening anxiety for the welfare of her son. You will bear this constantly in mind, will you not, Ella?"

"I will, uncle; indeed I will;" said the orphan, as after giving him a last embrace, she followed Lady Harriette from the room, with much such a sensation as Sindbad may be supposed to have experienced when he shook the most pertinacious old gentleman upon record from his shoulders.

CHAPTER XII.

A REVELATION.

IN one of the noblest mansions of one of the finest squares in the metropolis—at the period of our tale Belgravia was not—were seated at the moment in which we introduce them to the reader, two ladies and a gentleman. The room was spacious, and splendidly decorated; the ladies highly-bred both in look and manner; while their visitor, for such he was, did not detract in any degree from the perfection of the picture. The elder of the party was a matron, whose every tone and gesture indicated the habit of command: she had evidently once been very beautiful, but time had done its never-failing work, and she

was now only a fine and stately ruin. Although placid and self-controlled in her bearing, there was nevertheless an expression of anxiety in her countenance which betrayed that even for her the path of life had not been always strewn with roses; and there were lines upon her lofty brow, which induced the belief that a ducal coronet, gorgeous as it is, may at times press heavily. This lady was the Duchess of Windermere; the noble mother of five unmarried daughters.

Near her sat the Lady Constance, the betrothed of Horace, Earl of Disborough; a blooming girl, whose wonderful resemblance to her parent would at once have betrayed their relationship to the most casual observer. Tall, slight, and graceful in figure, her countenance, with its somewhat strongly marked features, wore a haughty expression which would perhaps have detracted from its charm, had that expression not been tempered by one of the sweetest smiles, and a pair of the brightest and softest eyes in the world, of that rare shade of blue which when she laughed, or the tears sprang into them, deepened into violet.

The gentleman was our old acquaintance Frank Hatherston.

"Then I may look for you in my box this evening, Mr. Hatherston?" said the duchess blandly.

"Your Grace is only too kind to find room for me;" was the reply.

"It will be rare indeed that I cannot do so; but on this occasion it is we who shall be the obliged parties, if there must needs be any feeling of obligation on the subject, as the duke is engaged to dine with His Majesty; and it is not every gentleman of our acquaintance with whom I should like a daughter of mine to be seen publicly at the opera."

Frank bowed his acknowledgments.

"Apropos of gentlemen;" pursued Her Grace; "did I not hear you mention to Lady Arrowbridge that Lord Disborough was an old friend of yours?"

"The very oldest and most intimate friend that I have in the world, madam: we were fellow-Etonians, and I have spent many weeks at different periods at Ashton Court."

"A fine old place, is it not?"

“Remarkably so; I have quite an affection for it, associated as it is with many very pleasant memories.”

“With the house do you mean, Mr. Hatherston?” asked the duchess with a peculiar laugh as she looked steadily in his face; “or with one of its fair inmates? You will admit that the inquiry is a legitimate one, when I tell you that I have heard a great deal of the extreme beauty of the two Miss Ashtons.”

Frank bore the scrutiny bravely; he neither coloured, nor shrank under the keen eye that was riveted on him, as he replied; “Disborough’s sisters are indeed unusually lovely; and there is a third young lady in the family, a niece of Sir Hercules, whose parents died in India, and who is perhaps even still more so.”

“Indeed!” exclaimed Her Grace with unaffected surprise: “How very singular that Lady Harriette should never have mentioned her to me.”

“Miss Ella Ashton’s habits are so very retiring;” said Hatherston quietly; “that she

seldom goes into society, and spends hours in the sick-room of her uncle."

"Ha! I understand;" smiled the duchess sarcastically; "a poor relation."

"I fear so."

"Then she is, of course, *hors du combat*;" was the rejoinder of the lady, and now indeed the blood did rush to the brow of Frank; "but her cousins will no doubt have large fortunes?"

"I should apprehend not, as I have reason to believe that Sir Hercules has recently lost very considerable sums by speculating in the railway about which the whole county appears to have run mad."

"Somewhat imprudent, I should be inclined to say, with three children to provide for;" observed Her Grace; "but the young ladies being so very handsome are probably engaged; while Lord Disborough, inheriting as he must do, the properties of both father and grandfather, may be considered as perfectly independent of any merely temporary improvidence on the part of the baronet."

"Were it to any one except Your Grace;"

said Hatherston ; “ I should hesitate to express my opinion on the prospects of Horace, were I not aware of your close intimacy with Lady Harriette Ashton, who would, beyond all doubt, had she possessed the opportunity, have told you frankly that for years to come he will inherit nothing but a name from the earl, while the debts of Lord Disborough were so heavy and so pressing, that the poor old baronet has been compelled to make great sacrifices in order to liquidate them.”

“ You astonish me, Mr. Hatherston !” cried the duchess, as with a heightened colour she glanced towards her daughter. “ Did Lady Harriette ever give you reason to suppose, Constance, that such was the case ?”

“ Never, mamma ;” was the reply ; “ nor, indeed, was it probable that she would confide anything to me which she concealed from yourself.”

“ I trust that I have not been guilty of an indiscretion ;” said the visitor ; “ but the whole affair was patent throughout the county, and I consequently cannot conceive that Lady

Harriette could for a moment have desired to keep it secret from so old a friend as Your Grace."

"Rather say so old an acquaintance, Mr. Hatherston;" was the cold rejoinder; "there never existed anything so close as friendship between the two families. The late earl, as you may probably have heard, was by no means a desirable intimate; and my reason for having invited the present one so frequently to my house, was less out of regard for his mother than from interest in himself; as I was of course aware that he was utterly unknown in Town, and would require the influence of some person of station to secure to him the immediate footing in society befitting his new rank; and really what you have told me distresses me very much, as the poor young man is in a false position altogether."

"I trust, nevertheless, that such will be the case only for a few years;" remarked Frank, on whom the comments of the duchess had made a disagreeable impression; "the Disborough property, when once relieved from its incumbrances, will be a princely one."

“No doubt, no doubt;” said Her Grace, as the lines deepened upon her forehead, and a strange expression passed over her face; “but a few years at Lord Disborough’s age, Mr. Hatherston, are an eternity. This is the precise period at which he should have been endeavouring to determine his whole after-course of life: when, by uniting himself to some girl of high rank and powerful connections, he might have done wonders. However, poor fellow! it is idle to talk of that now; and I really am—as I before remarked—very sorry.”

“I have every hope that he will still be enabled to do so—should he wish it”—was the rejoinder of Frank in a somewhat unsteady voice; “for Horace possesses so many excellent qualities that he cannot, where he is thoroughly known, fail to be loved for his own sake.”

“That is all very well, and very romantic, my dear sir;” replied Her Grace, glancing with a frown at the bowed head and crimsoned cheek of her daughter; “but it is a delusion which can only exist at your age. Parents who have daughters to establish have

a stringent duty to perform, alike to themselves and to their children; and you may rely on it that few mothers in *our* sphere of life would desire a matrimonial connection with a penniless peer."

The duchess smiled as she spoke, and so blandly emphasised the collective pronoun, that Hatherston at once felt her intention of including him in her own class.

Was he gratified by this marked courtesy? Under other circumstances he might not, perhaps, even have remarked it, but now it is certain that he did do so; and that it produced a very powerful effect upon him. Presented by his uncle's friend Lady Arrowbridge to the family of the Duke of Windermere, he had already had frequent opportunities of convincing himself that, with the exception of Ella, Lady Constance was one of the most lovely girls he had ever seen. Ella was lost to him—she loved another—and that other was his friend. He had found it hard to forgive Horace; but his better reason had gradually taught him to feel and admit the injustice of his resentment; and now, with all

the appliances of happiness save that which he the most coveted, he determined manfully to overcome his regrets, and to endeavour to obliterate them altogether by a new affection.

Totally unconscious and unsuspecting of the extent of Lady Arrowbridge's maternal good offices, he never for an instant attributed the excessive kindness of the duchess to her knowledge of his large fortune. How few of us ever look beyond our own personal qualities for the solution of so pleasing an enigma! The two elder Ladies Trevor were absent on a visit, but Constance was at home; and after wishing for a time that he could make the acquaintance of her sisters, Frank almost ceased to remember that she was possessed of such relatives. In short, he once more began to flatter himself that a future of felicity was before him; and Her Grace of Windermere was as well aware of the fact as himself.

She had written to summon her daughters to Town on the very day when Hatherston first made his bow in her drawing-room; and had experienced considerable self-gratulation

as she remembered that, wealthy as he was, her new guest was merely a commoner, to whom an alliance with a ducal family could not fail to be highly desirable. Two out of five well provided for! No wonder that she exulted in her approaching triumph.

Frank had, however, on the present occasion most roughly dispersed her cloud-castle; and she instantly resolved not to permit either Lady Imogene, or Lady Blanche, or Lady Lavinia, or Lady Geraldine, to interfere with the brilliant prospects of her favourite. As regarded Horace and his mother she was perfectly at her ease. The disingenuousness of Lady Harriette, and the something more than indifference of her son, afforded, now that it was her policy to do so, a sufficient pretext for breaking off the engagement to which she had hitherto looked forward with so much anxiety. But still Her Grace of Windermere was far too clever a woman to enact the principal part in the fable of the Dog and the Shadow, and she consequently resolved to defer the dismissal of Horace until she had secured his friend.

She rallied, therefore, from a reverie into which she had fallen, much sooner than her guest either wished or anticipated, as he had very profitably employed the interval of her silence in carrying on a low-voiced conversation with her beautiful and blushing daughter ; who, between the agitation caused by her mother's declarations on the subject of the young earl, and her own rapidly-growing suspicion that the handsome owner of thirty thousand a year was greatly disposed to throw himself at her feet, had never before looked so lovely in the admiring eyes which were rivetted upon her.

“ As for myself ;” said the duchess, gathering up the broken thread of her discourse ; “ had I been Lady Harriette Ashton, I would at least have retained the title of my family until I could have bestowed it unencumbered upon my son. As it is, rely on it that she has made a fatal mistake ; and I very much regret that the duke should have been mixed up in so incongruous and absurd a business.”

“ It would in all probability have been

more prudent had his mother coincided in opinion with Your Grace ;” acquiesced Hatherston ; “ but, unfortunately, the evil is now without remedy, as he is to kiss hands in a day or two, and to take the oaths.”

“ So I am informed. But to return to ourselves—Has my pet told you that she and I have made up our minds to leave Town the day after to-morrow for Trevor Court, in order to breathe the pure country air for a week or ten days ?”

Frank replied in the negative, while Lady Constance looked at her noble mother in blank nishment.

“ So, however, we have resolved ;” pursued the duchess with inimitable *aplomb*. “ I cannot afford, while my other two girls are gathering roses in the north, to let my youngest and dearest overtax her health and strength by the dissipations of London. In fact, we both require a little rest ; and Trevor Court is the very description of retreat the best calculated to ensure it.”

Hatherston looked considerably disconcerted.

“ I dare say ;” continued the lady ; “ that

you think us very courageous to leave Town even for a few days, in the height of the season ; but Constance, like myself, is a home-lover after all, however she may enjoy gaiety ; and I suppose it is that fact which has led me to prefer her society to that of her sisters, who only understand the meaning of the word ‘ country ’ to imply a large house full of guests, where the daylight amusements compensate for the midnight revelries of London.”

“ I am, on the contrary, myself so ardent a lover of the country for its own sake ; ” said Frank ; “ that I can quite appreciate your longing for ‘ fresh fields and pastures new,’ as a relief from glare, glitter, and frivolity.”

“ And am I to understand, Mr. Hatherston, that you could display as much heroism as ourselves ? ”

“ I believe it to be quite possible, Your Grace, but of course only under certain circumstances.”

“ Oh, pray initiate me into the nature of your requirements ; ” laughed the duchess ; “ I am really curious to know them.”

“First then, very pleasant companions in my voluntary exile—”

“Nothing more reasonable.”

“Next, a perfect conviction that I could reciprocate at least a portion of the gratification of which I was the recipient—”

“Pretty and modest.”

“And, finally, that I might be civilly given to understand when my presence had become *de trop*.”

“You are really and truly a most extraordinary person, Mr. Hatherston;” said the duchess; “and I am more than half-disposed to put your sincerity to the test. Presuming, therefore, that I should prove, if I exerted myself strenuously in so good a cause, a very pleasant companion: that I should feel disposed to admit that I valued your society as much as you appreciated mine; and that when I had grown weary of your presence I should inform you of the fact in the most civil way in the world, do you intend me to infer that you would bury yourself alive for a fortnight at Trevor Court with me and my daughter?”

“I do not wish you to form any inference on the subject, but to feel perfectly convinced that I should not only do so willingly but gratefully.”

“Gratefully!” echoed the duchess, with an affected astonishment which admirably veiled her exultation: “Nay, that is too much. However, as you have never seen Trevor Court, and you may find some amusement in exploring the environs, I think I shall agree to your terms, and temporarily adopt you as *l’enfant de la maison*. You can fish and shoot, at all events; and, moreover, there is a circulating library at the post town.”

“The three last are feeble inducements, Your Grace;” said Frank, laughing in his turn; “to a fly-rod I should prefer a billiard-table; to a fowling-piece a shuttle-cock and a pair of battledores; and as to a circulating library—I detest circulating libraries. The true luxury of a new book is to receive it direct from the publisher, uncontaminated by cigar-smoke, the impression of soiled fingers, and marginal notes; in which, nine times out of ten, the

lesser ninny is criticised by the greater. What say you, Lady Constance?"

"That I greatly enjoy a new book, but that I like it to be read to me." And the large lustrous blue eyes met those of Frank for a second with an earnestness which bewildered him.

"Constance is right, Mr. Hatherston;" said the duchess; "with a good reader nothing can be more delicious; and if you have only as much courtesy of disposition as you have harmony of voice, you ought to be, and must be, a good reader."

"Will you try me, madam?"

"With all my heart."

"I thank you most sincerely for taking me on trust. And now, there is but one impediment to your delightful project."

"An impediment?"

"I fear so. I wrote to Disborough yesterday to request of him to take up his abode with me during his stay in town."

"Is that all?" asked the duchess, concealing her annoyance beneath an affected yawn; "Nothing can be more easily arranged. Lend

him your rooms in the Albany during your absence. Your friend is surely too well-bred to expect that you can fail in your engagement to a lady in order to play the part of host to a gentleman."

"I am quite convinced that he is so:" was the prompt reply; "and as he will probably be detained a month in Town, I feel quite sure that he will pardon my truancy during a portion of the time. And now, with very sincere acknowledgments for your kindness, I will, with the permission of Your Grace, take my leave until I have the honor of joining you at the opera."

"On second thoughts;" drawled out the duchess, as though the result of the suggestion were to her the most indifferent thing in the world; "Suppose that instead of dining at your club you were to take your *perdreux aux truffes* and your *omelette* with Constance and me; would it not be a more convenient arrangement for all parties?"

"I can answer for myself at least;" said the flattered Frank, as he bowed himself out.

"You understand, Constance?" said Her

Grace of Windermere to her daughter when they were once more alone: "I must have no nonsense. Lord Disborough cares nothing about you; he has taken no pains to conceal the fact; while this man, as Lady Arrowbridge proved to me, has thirty thousand a-year."

"But, mamma—"

"Not a word more. Ring the bell for my maid."

CHAPTER XIII.

HORACE IN LONDON.

GREAT was the disappointment of Horace when on reaching Town, instead of the cordial greeting he had anticipated from his friend, a letter of apology was delivered to him by a servant, in which he was requested to consider himself as perfectly master of Frank's establishment as Frank himself.

"From what passed when we parted, Disborough;" continued the letter; "you will be quite unprepared for what I have to communicate, and may perhaps feel inclined to think somewhat harshly of me. And yet, why should it be so? Because the woman

whom I sought to marry preferred my friend, I had assuredly no right to consider myself aggrieved by either the one or the other ; and, by persisting in the belief that they had wronged me, to risk the regard of both. Under this impression, therefore, I confess to you with the less reluctance that I have almost convinced myself that there may, and does, exist in the world, another being almost as lovely, and almost as perfect, as your cousin. I have some reason to hope that I am not altogether indifferent to the fair girl herself ; and to feel that I am by no means so to her mother. *Apropos* of mothers-in-law, I have often heard that they are occasionally somewhat unpalatable to their daughters' husbands ; and I almost apprehend already that, should my suit prove successful, mine will not altogether falsify the statement ; but as I am to marry her daughter and not herself—Spare me a smile at my vanity ! it strikes me that I shall care little about it. Now do you understand, Horry, the cause of my apparently inhospitable discourtesy ? When I wrote to claim you, I had no more idea that the old lady meditated a retreat to the country

for weeks to come, than I had that I should receive an invitation to bear them company there during their fortnight's rustication; and as I am just far enough gone not to be anxious to have my path crossed a second time by some handsome cousin, I really had not resolution to refuse so tempting an opportunity of ascertaining what is as yet, I am compelled to confess, somewhat uncertain.

“And now, Dis, I know that I need say no more in excuse for my absence: nor shall I gratify your curiosity either by telling you who she is, or where she is. Should I win her, I will give you no cold paper-sketch of her perfections; while should I fail, the subject will of course be utterly uninteresting to you and distasteful to myself. In the latter case I shall start for China—Don't you think *that* a bright idea? And if you will make arrangements to travel with me as my keeper, or in any other capacity you may prefer, I shall be eternally grateful; and we will make such a collection of teapots and umbrellas for Lady Harriette as she never dreamt of in her life. Not, however, let me confide to you, that

I imagine I shall be driven to travel after such a style and fashion. No, Horry, I have already visions of one of our old haunts; pleasant Paris, or love-breathing Italy, with a companion I shall prefer even to yourself; so pray do not suffer my projects to interfere with your own.

“You will, no doubt, in a few days be plunged in dissipation to the very lips. I wish you well through the *baise-main*, and all the official drag-chains on your new greatness; from which you will, I trust, be released by the time I return to Town; for leave the Albany you must not before you have convinced yourself how heartily glad I am to have you as a guest.—*Valete ac Plaudite!*”

Any little annoyance that the young earl might at first have felt at the absence of Hatherston vanished as he refolded the letter. It was such a relief to him to find that their involuntary rivalry would no longer affect their long and steady friendship; and now, at the very period when he most required the sympathy and assistance of a friend, it was delightful to him to feel that Frank had the same

confidence in him as ever ; for the playfulness of his refusal to reveal the identity of his new conquest did not for an instant trouble him ; on the contrary, he could not repress a smile as he thought how certain it was that he should have acted precisely in the same manner had their position been reversed.

As regarded the occupancy of Hatherston's chambers, Horace was too high-minded not to be conscious that he was bestowing gratification rather than incurring obligation ; and, consequently, dismissing the subject altogether from his thoughts, he directed his whole attention to the business before him.

His first visit was necessarily to the Duke of Windermere, by whom he was to be presented to His Majesty ; and it was not without sundry misgivings, and a firm determination to avoid compromising himself in any way with Lady Constance until the return of his friend to Town, that he set forth. As he sauntered towards —— Square, for from some cause or other, he walked wonderfully slow for a young man of his active and energetic habits, he found sufficient occupation for his thoughts

in convincing himself that, under any circumstances, he ought not to affect the suitor until his social position was definitively acknowledged by the sovereign ; that it would be absolutely indelicate to do so ; and that, in short, he owed it to his own sense of self-respect to be silent—as long as he could possibly find an excuse for so doing.

Having arrived at this comfortable conclusion, he became more tranquil ; and his composure was thoroughly restored by the announcement of the ducal porter that His Grace was in Town, and at home ; but that the ladies of the family were all in the country. Could he have given vent to his feelings as in his boyish days, Horace would assuredly have thrown his hat into the air, and have indulged in a shout of triumph ; but those days were over ; and it was accordingly with as much gravity as he could assume that he desired a footman to announce him to the duke.

On entering the study he found His Grace of Windermere busily engaged with the Times newspaper ; which, however, he laid aside as his visitor entered ; and extending his hand, said cordially : “ Welcome, my lord, welcome.

I am truly glad that your arrival among us has not been longer delayed. I sincerely congratulate you on your success. His Majesty has been most gracious in his expressions concerning you; and is, as I have reason to know, prepared to receive you with the most condescending kindness."

"For which I shall be in a great degree indebted to Your Grace;" said Horace, as he took the proffered hand.

"Well, I trust that I have done you no disservice with either the king or his royal brother;" replied the duke pompously; "however, that is nothing to the purpose; and when once you have taken your seat in the Upper House you will be enabled to repay me in kind. By-the-bye, where are you? for I shall require your address, in order to communicate any intelligence concerning your reception which I may receive from the palace."

"I am at present in the Albany."

"Very good;" and drawing a blotting-book towards him as he spoke, His Grace inscribed upon a sheet of foolscap paper, in letters large enough for a placard, the very

intricate address for which he had asked. "And now," he continued, when he had accomplished the important undertaking; "I am sorry to tell you that the duchess and her daughters are for the moment absent from home. It is, however, only for the moment: some anxiety, I believe, that she felt lest the girls should wear themselves out before the end of the season, and not look their best at the Court Ball with which it is to terminate. I never, of course, interfere with her arrangements; but if you like to run down to Trevor Court, I have no doubt that she will be very happy to see you."

Horace expressed his acknowledgments.

"Meanwhile, I dine at eight;" pursued the duke; "and should you have no other engagement——"

His visitor greatly regretted that he had already formed one—the very atmosphere of the house oppressed him; and he longed to be once more in the free air and alone, to enjoy the sensation of temporary release which had lightened his heart of a heavy weight. The regret was necessarily mutual, and pro-

bably equally sincere on both sides ; and Horace, after half an hour's conversation on his personal affairs, and sundry, to him, unimportant and tedious instructions involving questions of court etiquette and court regulations, gladly took his leave. It had been evident throughout the whole of the interview that the duke felt himself to be working for a future son-in-law and not for a mere acquaintance ; and the conviction that such was the case irritated the nerves of Disborough, and impressed upon him very painfully the fact that he was, as his mother had declared, thoroughly compromised. However, the absence of the family would at least afford him breathing-time ; and he accordingly returned to his solitary dinner considerably relieved in mind.

The necessary ceremonies consequent upon his accession to the title were, thanks to the paternal solicitude of the Duke of Windermere, rendered far more agreeable to him than he had ventured to anticipate. The king was all urbanity and condescension ; and a day or two after the audience which was accorded to him, he received a command to join the royal

dinner-party. It is therefore almost superfluous to say that the young Earl of Disborough suddenly became the fashion without a single effort on his own part ; but, trammelled as he was in means, and anxious as he was at heart, he derived much less gratification from his apotheosis than he might otherwise have done. He was, however, compelled to show himself in many a brilliant saloon under the auspices of his self-constituted patron ; to return by a similar distribution of pasteboard the cards of a hundred new acquaintance ; and to undergo the advances of a score of politicians who were all anxious to secure his adhesion to their particular party. Like Byron he had “awoke one morning, and found himself famous,” and he had to bear the penalty of his greatness.

All this was wearisome enough, but he was aware that it was inevitable, and he accordingly surrounded himself with as much philosophy as he could command to the infliction ; consoling himself with the recollection that Lady Constance was absent from Town, and that Hatherston would shortly return to

decide his future movements. The letters of his mother were, however, a supreme annoyance : she considered herself aggrieved by the absence of the duchess and her daughter ; and strongly urged him to carry out her suggestion of raising money on the Disborough property, hastening his marriage, and leaving England with herself and his bride ; and although (forewarned by the admonitions of Sir Hercules), he firmly refused to involve himself in further embarrassments, her representations and reproaches, neither of which were spared, harassed and unnerved him. Such was his position when, about a fortnight after he reached Town, as he was lounging upon a sofa reading in the Morning Post an elaborate description of a party at which he had been present on the previous evening, the door suddenly opened, and admitted his host.

“ Dis, you are a capital fellow !” was the greeting of Hatherston, as they warmly shook hands : “ I knew that I could rely on your friendship ; and now that I find you here I have not a single wish ungratified.”

“ Then I am of course to infer, Frank, that

your suit has proved successful ; and from my soul, I congratulate you."

"I am certain that you do. Yes, Horry, I have won one of the loveliest women upon earth, and I trust I may prove worthy of her."

"That you *will* do so is certain ; and I shall be all impatience to see and admire the delightful creature who has restored to me the confidence and regard of my best and earliest friend."

"Not so fast ; not so fast, my Lord Disborough ;" said Hatherston joyously, as he drew off his gloves, and seated himself beside him : "remember that you have already played me one ugly trick, and that I have every right to distrust you. But to be serious, Horace ; how prosper your own affairs ?"

"My father has forbidden the marriage of my cousin with old Goldworthy."

"A determination worthy of him ; and I am truly glad to find that he has at length asserted himself. It has often struck me as an admirable trait in his character, that although where his personal tastes and wishes only were concerned he deferred to the will

of your mother without an effort at opposition, his sense of the duty which he owed to his brother's orphan never failed to rouse him into energy and resolution. All is right then : the great obstacle is removed ; and rely on it, that I shall yet see you as happy a man as myself."

"I wish I were able to indulge in the same hope ;" said Horace, as a spasm of pain passed over his features ; "but I have remained in Town until your return, Frank, to confide to you a very painful circumstance, and to solicit your advice."

"Anything and everything in my power—"

"I know it—I am sure of it—and I place my honour in your hands with perfect confidence. The affair is one of extreme delicacy ; and bitter as the sacrifice may be, I must, nevertheless, forfeit all prospect of future happiness rather than compromise myself as a man and a gentleman."

"My dear fellow, do explain your meaning."

"It is simply this, that my mother, anxious to force my fortunes in the world according to her own view of the subject, has entangled me

with a very charming girl—that is a fact which I am bound under every circumstance to admit—and so thoroughly entangled me, that although I have never personally committed myself by word or look, I fear that I have no way of escape. You know, better perhaps than any one else on earth, Frank, how devotedly attached I am to my cousin Ella ; and it is therefore needless to add that beyond my sincere admiration, I have no feeling of any kind towards the young lady in question.”

“A serious dilemma indeed, Horry ; I only wish that we could induce this paragon of Lady Harriette’s selection to bestow her smiles on some other swain.”

“Nay, don’t jest, Frank, for I assure you that the whole business makes me wretched. What do you advise me to do?”

“Advise you, my dear fellow? How the deuce can I give you advice in a matter about which I as yet know scarcely anything, and in which I do not consequently see my way?”

“I will be more explicit ;” said Horace, tossing away his book ; “and, to begin with

the beginning, I must tell you that my mother was before her marriage extremely intimate with the present Duchess of Windermere."

"So I have heard her say."

"Well, when I accompanied Lady Harriette to Town some months ago, at the period of the late earl's death, the two ladies conceived the notable project of cementing their old family friendship by a marriage; and I was consequently thrown into constant contact with one of the finest and most accomplished girls in London."

"How very unfortunate!—But do you know, Dis., I am beginning almost to regret that you were not heart-free—for reasons of my own."

"So you see, Frank, I danced with her every where, two or three times in the course of an evening: and was frequently requested to do so by the duchess herself when she wished to shirk a guardsman or a younger son—I turned over the leaves of her music at home, and rode beside her in the park; all which was pleasant enough; but *with* which I assure you, upon my honor as a man, that I

connected not the most distant idea even of a flirtation."

Hatherston laughed.

"You may therefore imagine my surprise;" pursued Horace; "when my mother informed me that I had thoroughly compromised myself by the publicity of my attentions; that Her Grace of Windermere had desired an explanation of my intentions; and that she had replied by assuring her that I was only waiting until the title of my grandfather was secured to me, to offer my hand to her daughter."

"Poor Disborough!" said his friend, with a fresh burst of gaiety; "I fear that you have really no chance of escape; save indeed, as I have reason to believe, that your lady-mother has been amusing herself by harassing you with this tale in the hope of weaning your affections from your cousin."

"I wish I could think so."

"I am very much inclined to believe that you may: but pray tell me which of the five weird sisters (for I am aware that there are five) you honoured with your preference."

"I found no opportunity of bestowing the

apple ;” replied Horace ; “ as I never met any of the Ladies Trevor except—”

“ Lady who ?” cried Hatherston, bounding from his seat.

“ Lady Constance ;” quietly repeated his companion.

“ Why, Horace ;” exclaimed Frank, more excited than his friend had ever before seen him : “ This is sheer midsummer madness ! And so you are breaking your heart because a brace of old women were supposed to be forcing you into a marriage with a girl about whom you care absolutely nothing. Now, listen to me. The acquaintance which existed between Her Grace and your mother in their youth was slight and casual : the duchess resolutely repudiates the idea of a close friendship. She considers you a very handsome, high-bred, distinguished young fellow, who is well worthy of the coronet he has been called upon to wear ; but she has just about as much notion of compelling you to a marriage with one of her daughters, as I have of making a balloon-voyage to Japan.”

“ I can assure you, Hatherston—”

“And I can assure *you*, Disborough ;” interposed Frank in his turn ; “that your hopes and fears are all moonshine. Why, my dear fellow, here I am fresh from Trevor Court, with the maternal kiss of the portly duchess still tingling on my cheek ; and a lock of the silkiest hair in the world in my pocket-book, shorn from the graceful head of my affianced bride the Lady Constance.”

“Hatherston, this is cruel !”

“Nonsense, Dis. What I tell you is a fact ; and consequently your mother’s tale is a fiction.”

“But I have seen letters from Her Grace
——”

“That is very possible.”

“Letters,” persisted Horace ; “in which she expresses her anxiety to secure her daughter’s happiness by making her my wife—and, moreover, I have reason to believe that the terms of the settlements are already arranged.”

“Then rely on it that the dowagers never revealed their project to Constance, who was decidedly as heartwhole when I first met her

as I could desire ;” said Hatherston ; “ and from whose own lips I have received the assurance that the affection which she has confessed for me, is the only one she has ever felt.”

“ Frank !” exclaimed his friend ; “ I am utterly bewildered. I know that you would not wilfully trifle with my feelings ; but what you tell me is so extraordinary—so unexpected—so—”

“ I can quite believe it, Horace ; but depend on what I tell you, that in so far as Lady Constance Trevor is concerned you are as free as air.”

The emotion of the young earl was so violent that he turned ghastly pale, and remained silent ; while Hatherston, unfolding from a fragment of gauze paper a long lock of hair, held it towards him, and said in a low voice : “ Under other circumstances, Disborough, I should feel myself to be acting with gross indelicacy in exhibiting even to you so irrefutable a token of affection as this from the woman I am about to make my wife : but I owe you some reparation for the wrong which

I did you some months ago ; and I therefore consider it my duty to set your mind thoroughly at ease upon a subject so important to your happiness. You *must* recognise this ; and you see it in *my* possession."

"Frank ;" exclaimed Horace, as he threw himself into the arms of his friend ; "you have given me new life ! I am indeed free ; and free without dishonour. I have once more something to live for—something to hope."

"To be sure you have, my dear boy ;" was the playful reply. "You have to live to place a coronet on one of the noblest and purest brows that ever gave the costly toy a resting-place. We are the two most lucky fellows in the universe !"

Horace was too much excited to be gay : he was actually oppressed by the extent of his sense of relief. The world appeared to have expanded about him, and he was lost in its immensity. What cared he now for crippled means and disappointed expectations ? With Ella in the perspective, the trials of the present were as nothing.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LEASH OF LETTERS.

A FEW days subsequent to the explanation between the two friends recorded in our last chapter, Lady Harriette, while examining the contents of the letter-bag, uttered an exclamation of pleasure on recognising the handwriting of the Duchess of Windermere.

“No doubt she has written to inform us of the completion of the settlements;” she said exultingly; “I begged that she would do so the moment the lawyers had finished their task. It is very fortunate that Lord Disborough—” her son had already ceased, with her, to be aught save the Earl of Disborough—“very fortunate indeed that Lord Disborough

should be in Town ; where I must of course, under these circumstances, immediately join him."

Sir Hercules made no reply, and his wife left the room in order to read her letter, and to arrange her plans without interruption.

As she disappeared the baronet heaved a heavy sigh, and drew the post-bag towards him ; for having once possessed herself of the long-desired communication, Lady Harriette had neglected to explore its further contents.

They were, however, by no means unimportant. The first letter which he took out was for Ella, from her fast friend Madame Despreaux ; then came half a dozen journals ; and finally an Indian letter addressed to himself in the well-known writing of his old correspondent, Mr. Richard Truman, of Calcutta.

Sir Hercules eagerly tore it open, and read as follows :—

“ *Calcutta, Nov. 6, 18—.*

“ SIR,

“ A most extraordinary circumstance has taken place in our establishment,

of which I hasten to inform you. Having occasion to enlarge our fireproof vaults, the workmen were compelled to throw down a party-wall, and in so doing they discovered a secret hiding-place of whose existence I was myself totally ignorant, and which could, consequently, have been known only to my late partner, Mr. Braveby. Among other property, evidently confided to his care, we found a small iron box addressed to yourself; but every effort to discover the key in any of our safes has been useless; and it is therefore to be presumed that Mr. Horace Ashton must have retained it. I can of course give you no idea of the nature of its contents, further than by saying that, considering the material of which it is made, it is by no means heavy. I write per mail in order that you may be at once apprised of the discovery; but I am happy to be able at the same time to state that a friend of mine is about to leave in the next vessel for England, who has offered to take charge of it on the passage; and as, by a curious coincidence, Miss Ella Ashton's old Ayah accompanies the family to Europe

in charge of their children, and is naturally anxious to see her young mistress again, I have ventured to authorise her visit to Ashton Court, where she will place the box in your hands. As I know the woman to be perfectly trust-worthy, I believe that I could have made no better arrangement to secure its safe transmission ; and in the sincere hope that it may prove of importance to the interests of the young lady, to whom I beg to offer my best respects, I have the honour to subscribe myself,

“ Sir,

“ Yours very obediently,

“ RICHARD TRUMAN.”

“ To Sir Hercules Ashton, Bart.”

The old gentleman sat for awhile motionless with the letter in his hand ; not that he was calculating the possible value, or the probable nature, of the long concealed treasure ; but that once more he appeared to hear a voice from the grave reminding him of the duty which he owed to his brother's child, and demanding how that duty had been fulfilled. Long-past

years, and long-past acts rose up before him : his early youth returned ; his early manhood was restored ; and then as memory slowly did her work, he parted again in anger with his only brother, and he wept his death—and he adopted his orphan. Large and unconscious tears stole down his cheeks ; practically he might have much with which to reproach himself, but when he questioned his heart and his affections, he became calm and still. Ella had ever been to him a sacred trust, and he had respected that trust : he had loved her as his own child ; and as such he loved her still. There was only one remembrance which brought with it a pang of self-condemnation ; he had suffered himself to peril her slender inheritance, and he felt that he was not, and could not, be justified in risking what might one day be her all, even although he had done so in the full faith of repaying her “ even to the uttermost farthing.” And then, indeed, as his thoughts rested upon this circumstance, he reverted to the letter which he had just received ; and marvelled whether the box, the *small* box, the box which was so “ far from

heavy" that it could not decidedly contain many of those almost-fabulous lacs of rupees with which the people of England were at that period wont to associate the idea of an Indian fortune, would indeed have any influence on the future prospects of his niece; and he was still lost in these conjectures when a soft hand was laid upon his arm, and a gentle voice murmured in his ear:

"Forgive me, my dear uncle, but it is so long since I had a letter from France that I have become quite uneasy; and I venture to intrude on you to ask if there is anything for me to-day."

"There is indeed, my child;" said Sir Hercules, as he raised his eyes to those of the orphan; "and something so remarkable that we must await with patience its result. One thing, however, I have to communicate to you, Ella, which I am sure will give you pleasure; your old ayah must be at this moment on her way to England, and is coming to Ashton Court to look once more on her long-lost nurseling."

"Diana!" exclaimed the excited girl, clasp-

ing her hands, and sinking upon a chair : “ My own poor, devoted Diana ! This is happy news indeed. But how have you learnt this, uncle ? It seems like a dream—and such a delightful dream ! ”

“ I have still more to tell you, my dear child ; ” said Sir Hercules ; and placing the letter before her, he bade her carefully study its contents. She received it anxiously, and after having read it to an end a bright smile rose to her lips, as she again murmured : “ My own poor devoted Diana, we were not then parted for ever ! ”

“ But the box, the iron box, Ella— ” said the baronet.

“ Ha, true ; a box has been found ; ” replied the orphan tranquilly ; “ how very singular that it should have been lost for so many years. When do you think my ayah will arrive, uncle ? ”

“ That, my dear girl, will depend on many circumstances ; but probably in a month or two, as this letter has already reached us.”

“ This is indeed a happy day for me ; ” said the orphan ; “ a letter from dear kind Madame

Despreaux, and news of my good old nurse ; I feel as though I were steeped in sunshine."

"And Lady Harriette is as well pleased as yourself ;" observed the baronet, looking as if the sunshine had by no means penetrated into his hemisphere ; "She has received a letter from the duchess."

"To announce—?" faltered out his niece.

"To announce, as she informed me, the completion of the settlements ;" growled out the old gentleman ; "Further than that I know nothing, as she left me before she had read it."

Ella turned aside to conceal her emotion, but she made no rejoinder.

"But this box, my dear ; have you no curiosity about this mysterious box ?" asked her uncle.

"None whatever ;" said the orphan ; "save indeed that it may, and does in all probability, contain papers which will relieve the memory of my dear father from the imputation of insolvency ; and that will be a blessing for which I feel that I could never be sufficiently grateful."

“You are right, Ella ; rely on it that you are right ;” exclaimed the baronet exultingly ; “My brother had too high a spirit to brook such a suspicion, and there can be no doubt that he took proper precautions to prevent it ; precautions which, unhappily, the death of Mr. Braveby has so long rendered unavailing. You have solved the enigma, my dear child. To be sure : how could I be so obtuse ? The box is not heavy, and is well secured ; consequently it is fair to infer that it contains important papers. I wish it had arrived. He was naturally anxious, poor fellow ! to prove to me that the honor of the family had been safe in his hands—not that I needed such an assurance—but I am glad of it for many reasons ; truly glad ; and now what says the excellent Madame Despreaux ? ”

Ella glanced her eye rapidly over the letter of her friend, which was more brief than usual ; and having assured herself that it contained no allusions which would be painful to her uncle, she proceeded to read it aloud, translating the contents as she did so :

“MY DEAR CHILD,

“I always feel tempted to address you after the fashion of our great Henry IV., and to style you *Ma Mie*. I have wonderful news for you to-day; and as Madame de Sevigné wrote to her daughter when announcing the marriage of *la Grande Mademoiselle* to Lauzun, I am inclined to say, ‘*Je vous le donne en vingt, je vous le donne en cent, jetez votre langue aux chiens,*’ for you will never guess what I have to tell. Well then, to terminate your suspense at once, I am going to be married in my turn; but not, like *la Grande Mademoiselle*, to make a *mésalliance*. Far from it; and I know you will rejoice to hear that I am the happiest little woman upon earth. I do not to this hour quite comprehend how it came about, but thus much, *ma charmante Ella*, is certain, that I shall shortly become the wife of one of the worthiest men in the world, a wealthy *propriétaire* with a *château*—no, that is perhaps too ambitious a term to apply to a delicious *maison de campagne*—a good income, and one of the warmest hearts that ever beat in a human bosom. I

need scarcely inform you, therefore, that I have become the proverb of the province. Fancy your poor governess with a *câleche* in which even miladi herself would not disdain to ride : a *jardin anglais* ; and, in short, every appliance to render me a *grande dame* were I ever inclined to degenerate into anything so little. One thing only is wanting, *mon aimable enfant*, to complete my perfect contentment ; I want you—I want your sad sweet smile in order to render it more glad ; I want your soft tones to teach them a more joyous melody ; I want your warm, affectionate heart to respond to the love of my own, and to afford me the only companionship that I can ever desire beyond that of my husband. There, the word is written, and very formidable it looks on paper. I *should* have said beyond that of M. de Meau-repas ; and now, Ella, you have my great secret ; and you have read French history to little effect if you do not recognize the name of an eminent statesman, who has bequeathed an inheritance of glory to his descendants. *Entendez-vous, ma belle enfant ?* I want you ; nothing but you. At Ashton Court they can

spare you, for they have everything to make life bright and happy: riches, and station, family ties, and family affections; while I shall leave my own relatives to follow my husband to his estate on the Loire; and to replace all that I have left I shall have only—— M. de Meaurepas! Not that I repine; far from it. As I said before, I am the happiest little woman upon earth; but my heart is large enough to hold two affections; and if you *can* come to me, Ella; if you *can* come, I shall have nothing left to wish. *Mon futur*, to whom I have talked of you, to whom I have described you, and whom I have taught to love you, joins in my entreaty. Come to us, Ella, and be our sister, or our child, as you will; but come to us. I will let you know the moment that I have settled myself in my new home: and meanwhile, with my respectful remembrances to *ce brave* Sir Hercules and his family, I am always

“ *Votre toute dévouée,*

“ CÉCILE DESPREAUX.”

As the orphan ceased reading there was a

profound silence; Ella bent down her head and wept tears of deep and soothing gratitude; while the heart of the baronet swelled within him. How little had the treasure thus coveted by a comparative stranger been estimated under his own roof! How frail was their actual hold upon her! In a few brief months he would retain no legal right to control her actions; and it was quite probable that her affection for himself would form no adequate counterpoise to her sense of the injustice displayed towards her by Lady Harriette. Horace, too! she had loved *him*; and how had her affection been requited? Had she not been made, or barely escaped being made, the scapegoat of their altered fortunes? The soul of the old man grew dark within him; and it was with a pang which none could appreciate save himself that he at length inquired:

“And how shall you reply to that letter, Ella?”

The orphan rose; fixed one long, steady gaze upon his face, and then said in a low but firm voice:

“ Should Lord Disborough and his wife reside at Ashton Court, Sir Hercules, I shall accept the home offered to me by Madame Despreaux : should they reside elsewhere, anywhere, where we are not likely to meet, then I will ask you to be to me what you have ever been, to love me as you have always loved me, and to continue to me a protection for which I can never sufficiently evince my gratitude.”

In the next instant she was clasped to her uncle's heart, and she felt his hot tears rain down upon her neck. He could, however, make her no pledge that it should be as she wished ; he could only implore of her to pause before she came to any decision, and express to her how deeply he was moved by her affection. He told her how grievously his pride would be wounded should she become a dependant on the bounty of strangers and foreigners ; how cheerless his old age would be without her ; how bitterly he had reproached himself for his supineness during the long and weary years in which she had been subjected to the unkindness of Lady Harriette ; and

then asked her to forgive him.—Aye, the righthearated old man, with all his traditional pride about him, humbled himself even to that—asked her to forgive him—when she remembered that for her sake, and in her cause, he had roused himself from his habitual apathy to assert her rights, and to maintain her freedom of action. Half shocked, and thoroughly subdued, Ella in her turn wept upon his bosom. Never had he been so dear to her as at that moment, when in consoling and reassuring him she felt half consoled herself. How could she, how *dared* she, complain of her isolation while he clung to her with such trustful and confiding affection? “I will *not* go under any circumstances:” trembled on her lips: but again the vision of Horace and his high-born bride rose up before her, and the words were unuttered.

While this conversation was taking place in the sick-chamber of Sir Hercules, a far different scene was enacting in the dressing-room of his wife. Lady Harriette had, as we have said, retired with the letter of the duchess, careless of the anxiety of her hus-

band until she had informed herself of its contents, which she did much more rapidly than she had anticipated. Her Grace of Windermere was ordinarily extremely diffuse upon paper: to her, as to many others of the idle members of her sex, the use of the pen was an agreeable occupation, and she accordingly covered page after page with her elegantly-illegible scrawl, detailing fashionable scandals and fashionable frivolities, with an easy grace which was declared by her correspondents to be almost inimitable; but on the present occasion her epistolary effort had been succinct enough

Thus ran her note.

“Her Grace the Duchess of Windermere presents her compliments to Lady Harriette Ashton, and regrets that a serious misunderstanding totally precludes the possibility of the late projected alliance between the two families. Had Lady Harriette Ashton frankly informed the Duchess of Windermere of the actual position of her son, the engagement between the Earl of Disborough and Lady

Constance Trevor would never have been contemplated for an instant ; an assurance in which the duchess has the sanction of His Grace to inform Sir Hercules and Lady Harriette Ashton that he formally concurs."

The note fell from the hands of the mortified and indignant mother as she reached its close ; and the Dead Sea Apple which she had so eagerly raised to her lips, fell with it in ashes at her feet.

CHAPTER XV.

A DISCARDED SUITOR.

AT the period when this letter reached Ashton Court, Mr. Goldworthy had departed for Manchester in a state of indignant mortification ; declaring himself to be, as he undoubtedly was, a very ill-used man ; and, still worse, a woman's dupe. He had but one consolation in his annoyance, but this to a money-worshipper was a great one : he knew that the affairs of Sir Hercules were becoming more embarrassed every day ; nor did he leave Goldworthy Park without issuing stringent orders to his agent instantly to apprise him of any further sale or mortgage on his neighbour's property. Who could tell ? The whole

of the baronet's estate might ultimately come to the hammer—and then—Why then the outraged manufacturer had visions of his own, totally irrespective of matrimony or feminine intrigues. Lord Elwood had returned to The Chace, and was eager to complete his marriage with Matilda, which Lady Harriette had, for reasons that we have already shown, hitherto decidedly opposed. Now, however, those reasons existed no longer; for the ducal coronets that were to have shed such splendour over the ceremony had escaped her grasp; and the peer was her winning card. She was, in sooth, beset by disappointment; and the anxiety which she suffered as she reflected on the precarious fortunes of her son, would, had he been aware of its extent, almost have revenged Mr. Goldworthy himself.

Horace lingered for some weeks in London. With a heart at ease he could at length enter with zest into the gaieties around him; and he accordingly did not seek to precipitate his return to a home where he was aware that the reproaches and repinings of his mother would be his first welcome. He was greatly

amused, moreover, by the admirable tactics of Her Grace of Windermere, who received his visit, when he accompanied Hatherston to pay his respects to the ladies of the family, and to express his sense of the obligation which he had incurred to the duke, with an ease and self-possession positively startling. No reference to the past escaped her lips: he was Mr. Hatherston's friend, and nothing more, save a casual acquaintance. Of course, for the moment, civility was all that she could venture to show him; but she was nevertheless careful that the civility should be marked; he was, at all events, a peer of the realm; and rank has so many resources in this tuft-hunting country of ours, that there was no saying how soon he might find himself enabled to form an establishment. This reflection at once decided her conduct: she had still four daughters to marry; and she was much too politic to make an enemy of the man who *might* one day possibly become her son-in-law.

Lady Constance, meanwhile, played her part no whit worse than her noble mother; and if her cheek *did* flush, and her hand *did*

tremble, when the young Earl of Disborough followed his friend into the room, it was certainly not the fault either of her inclination or her training ; for she had already taught herself to coincide in the opinion of her more experienced parent that a wealthy commoner would prove a more eligible husband than an impoverished peer : but nature will not be altogether defrauded of her rights. Lady Constance had loved Horace—we will not say that she loved him still—and she could not meet him again for the first time altogether without emotion. Memory was busy with her, but she soon shook off its thrall. In spite of his pride, and what he had declared to be his conviction, Hatherston had not sufficient control over himself to avoid glancing towards her as she uttered her greeting to Disborough ; and by an intuition as sure as it is unaccountable, she felt that his eye was upon her, and rallied with a skill which did no disgrace to the teaching of the duchess. The other four Ladies Trevor were still in the country ; and under the present uncertain circumstances of Horace, Her Grace of Windermere rejoiced that

it was so, as her maternal solicitude for their future establishment *might* have led her into some imprudence ; while, as it was, she could even venture to invite him to dinner, and to inquire after his family.

All this was very satisfactory to Horace, and precisely the state of things the best calculated to justify him in the mind of Lady Harriette. It was plain that neither the duchess nor her daughter desired to recal the past ; and thus a tacit understanding at once existed between the several parties which effectually prevented all visible embarrassment on either side.

Such being the case, Horace could well afford to meet without wincing the bantering attacks of his friend ; who, having surrendered himself without a struggle a willing captive to the fascinations of the high-born beauty to whom he was betrothed, could not, or would not, conceive it possible that any man—even the lover of Ella—would so coldly resign her, had she indeed given him the most remote reason to hope that she might ever be his.

Thus were things situated when Lady Har-

riette Ashton sat overwhelmed with consternation in her morning dressing-room, with the letter of the duchess lying on the carpet before her. Her first impulse was to trample it beneath her feet, and she obeyed the impulse ; which probably tended to soothe her ruffled pride, as she shortly afterwards rose, gathered it up with one of her most bitter sneers playing about her lips ; and with a firm step proceeded to the apartment of the baronet.

“I have come to communicate to you the contents of the letter which I have received from the Duchess of Windermere, Sir Hercules ;” she said, in a hard dry tone which caused him to look up enquiringly : “I do so, because I feel that it is my duty as a wife ; but I beg you at the same time to understand that I neither expect your sympathy, nor request your condolence. On this subject, as on many others, we think and feel very differently ; nor is it to be supposed that you can resent an insult offered to *my* family so keenly as myself.”

“What says the duchess ?” was the brief inquiry.

“She declines the alliance of the Earl of Disborough.”

“Ha, indeed!—Then, by the head of Confusius, madam, I am very sincerely obliged to her; and she is a much more sensible woman than I suspected her to be.”

“Sir Hercules, you astonish me! Do you really not comprehend that we are disgraced by her summary dismissal of our son?”

“Not a whit!” said the baronet joyously: “It is not Horace that she has discarded, but his poverty. Depend on it that she has discovered some more profitable way of disposing of her daughter.”

Lady Harriette seated herself, and began to beat the floor impatiently with her foot. For awhile Sir Hercules did not intrude upon her reverie, for he had some trouble in concealing the extent of his satisfaction at her intelligence. He had already freed Ella; and now here was Horace liberated in his turn. The fates were decidedly in his favor; and he could once more look into the future with complacency. Suddenly, however, he remembered that he had also his tale to tell; and he proceeded to

read to her irate ladyship the letter of Mr. Truman.

“Is it not a singular affair altogether?” he asked, as he refolded the business-like looking sheet of foolscap.

“More unpleasant than extraordinary;” sneered Lady Harriette; “a plausible pretext for once more intruding that odious black woman upon us; and nothing more.”

“I confess that I am of a different opinion;” said the baronet; “a box so carefully secreted must have been considered of some importance.”

“I trust that it may prove so;” was the cold rejoinder; “but I confess that I have personally made a sufficient acquaintance with Miss Ella Ashton’s heirship; nor do I believe that she is destined to become the heroine of a fairy tale.”

“We shall see;” said Sir Hercules sturdily: “at all events she is handsome enough and good enough to be worthy of even such a miracle as that, were fairies in the habit of crossing the sea in iron boxes.”

“I wonder that you can amuse yourself

with such childish talk ;” angrily exclaimed his wife ; “ when you know how my heart is wrung for my poor boy ; and what a state of mind he must himself be in ! ”

“ It is precisely because I flatter myself that I *do* know his state of mind that I feel inclined to be somewhat more jocose than usual ;” persisted the baronet ; “ Rely upon it that the poor fellow never was so happy in his life.”

“ In that case, Sir Hercules ;” said Lady Harriette, pinching her thin lips until they turned blue beneath the pressure ; “ I congratulate you both, for certainly the present prospects of your family are not such as are generally considered to be conducive to happiness. However, I have done. All my plans have been thwarted ; all my wishes overruled ; and I have sacrificed myself for *your* son only to see you exult over my disappointment.”

“ On the contrary ;” replied her husband ; “ I can never exult over anything which causes you pain ; but at the same time I must be allowed to confess that I do rejoice to know that my noble boy will not be compelled to offer himself up a sacrifice to my necessities ;

or to endure the mortification of feeling that he has married into a family who regard an alliance with the son of a county baronet as a condescension ; and that thus it would have been I have learnt from your own lips."

"But do you not see that the failure of her brother's marriage will ruin the prospects of Florence?" asked his wife pettishly.

"I do not ; from what I witnessed, and from what I have heard of fashionable life, I most heartily deprecate it for any daughter of mine ; and the certainty that Elwood will live upon his estate, like a rational being who is conscious of his responsibility, has made me much happier than any consideration of his rank. As it is, we shall gain a son ; but had Matilda become the wife of a mere fopling of nobility, we should only have lost a daughter."

"Situated as we are, I at all events recommend that your niece should pass a year or two in France with Madame Despreaux ;" said Lady Harriette sullenly : "You cannot consider her as an eligible inmate until Florence is established."

“ We will wait for the box before we send her into exile,” was the smiling reply.

“ And the black woman—”

“ And the black woman, as a necessary consequence.”

“ Well, Sir Hercules, you have made your decision, and you must abide by it ; and if you think it right, or even natural, to sacrifice your own children—”

“ I do *not*—I never *will*—sacrifice my children, madam ;” exclaimed the baronet indignantly : “ either to my ambition, or to my interests ; but neither will I sacrifice the child of my brother ; and before you reproach me for persisting in a sacred duty, let me request of you to look into your own heart, and to ask yourself what you have been seeking for your only son. Was it his happiness ? You well know that it was not. You well know that the very idea of the marriage which you were striving to force upon him was torture to all the best feelings of his nature. You well know that nothing but a sense of honor, and a desire not to lessen your dignity in the eyes of the Duchess of Windermere, would

ever have induced him to listen for an instant to so monstrous a proposition as an union with a woman to whom he was utterly indifferent. Do not seek to shelter yourself under the pretext that you were endeavouring by the accomplishment of this most unholy marriage to bolster up our falling fortunes ; and that it was this circumstance which reconciled Horace to his unhappy position, for I tell you that it was not so ; I solemnly assured him that not one shilling of his wife's portion should ever be expended for me or mine. No, madam, no ; the boy was not misled upon that point, at least—he was in your hands, and it was for your sake alone that he endured all the misery he has undergone.”

“ And pray, Sir Hercules, what alternative had you to offer to your family when you thus heroically eschewed the fortune of Lady Constance ? ”

“ The alternative of an honest man whose resources were not yet quite exhausted ; ” said the baronet sternly ; “ I have raised money upon my income, impoverished as it is. We have long lived upon eleven thousand a year ;

we must now learn to live upon four : and should further claims be made upon me by the Directors of the railway, I shall abandon the shares altogether."

"Sir Hercules, you cannot be serious!" exclaimed his wife, turning as pale as death.

"Perfectly so : instead of living for the world, we must begin to live for ourselves. The world has made no return for our concessions, and we will make no more. Neither sale nor mortgage will I from this hour authorise upon the estate ; for I *will not* leave my children beggars. You are well aware of the multiplied demands upon me, both in my own person and in that of Lord Disborough ; they must and shall be satisfied, but I will not suffer them to be increased ; I feel that I have already lost position and peace of mind ; the one, as you well know, almost as dear to me as the other ; and I am satisfied with the extent of my experience. I am now comparatively a poor man—so be it—that is a fact which cannot be repaired for years ; but I will not forego my self-respect as well as my duty as a father, by any further weakness. If we can only con-

trive to make our home happy, we shall soon cease to regret that it is no longer quite so luxurious as it once was. From you I shall exact no sacrifice in any shape whatever ; but towards my children and myself I shall be less indulgent. The expense of Matilda's marriage must of course be met in a manner creditable to her family ; and that once over, Horace will, I feel perfectly satisfied, cheerfully perform his duties as a country gentleman and my son, until both the estates to which he must ultimately succeed are once more unencumbered."

"While poor Florence, if I understand you rightly, is also to be immured within the park-fence, without a chance of establishing herself ; for all visiting will be utterly out of the question should you really persist in your very sagacious determination," said Lady Harriette sharply.

"Judging from the past ;" replied her husband ; "I do not see that her opportunities will be greatly diminished. For five years she has been, as I have heard from yourself, the belle of the county ; and she is still under

my roof. I trust, moreover, that no child of mine need be anxious to seek a new home; nor should I have a very high idea of the delicacy of Florence if I could believe that she is one of the husband-hunting young ladies from whom I suffered so much annoyance in my time."

"It is in vain to argue with you, Sir Hercules, if you will not hear reason;" said Lady Harriette with a heightened colour and flashing eyes, as she rose from her seat; "and I can therefore only hope that the 'small box' which is to repay you for sacrificing your children to the Indian heiress, may prove to be the talisman that you anticipate. I will no longer intrude upon your golden dreams."

"It is very painful to me;" said the baronet gloomily; "to be so constantly misunderstood, and not to find in my own wife the sympathy and support which I require under my present misfortunes; but I have, perhaps, no right to expect it, though I confess that it wounds me deeply to see my motives so systematically misconstrued, and my anxiety for those about me so utterly unappreciated."

The lips of Lady Harriette parted as if in reply ; but, whatever were the words which she was about to utter, she did not suffer them to become audible ; and she left the room without any rejoinder.

CHAPTER XVI.

NEW TIES.

As Lord Elwood continued importunate, and Lady Harriette had no longer a pretext for delay, the period of his marriage was at length definitively arranged, and Horace was summoned home in order to be present at the ceremony. The dowager-countess and her youngest daughter also arrived at The Chase, where they welcomed the bride-elect with an affectionate cordiality which deeply affected the anxious girl. Evidently struck by her extreme beauty, and the graceful simplicity of her manner, the venerable Lady Elwood did not at all attempt to conceal her gratification ; while her son leant over the back

of the sofa where his blushing betrothed sat beside her future mother-in-law, their hands clasped together, with a face radiant with exultant happiness.

“I forgive you all your impatience, Elwood;” smiled the countess, as she smoothed back the long golden ringlets from Matilda’s cheeks; “nor will I repine that I can no longer ask from you more than a divided affection, for I already feel that you have given me another child to love. You will miss this dear girl for a time, Lady Harriette;” she added, turning towards her elder guest with a courteous bend; “but you must not forget that The Chase and Ashton Court are only separated by a few miles, and that you may constantly meet.”

“I shall indeed require that consolation;” was the reply; “for, as Elwood is aware, Matilda and I have never yet been separated. I must not, however, be selfish; for I am convinced that in giving her to your son I am securing her happiness.”

The young peer murmured his thanks.

“And now, Algernon;” said the countess;

“you know that I have a very pleasant duty to perform. Your sister Louisa will give you the key of my cabinet.”

“Here it is ;” said the beautiful baroness Von Reigenbach, as she shook back her raven curls, and glanced playfully in his face ; “ Do not loiter by the way, or mamma will have to chide you for another failing besides impatience.”

Elwood replied with equal gaiety, and departed on his errand.

“ What say you to my proposal, Lady Harriette ;” asked the baroness as her brother disappeared ; “ I do not ask the question of my fair sister-in-law that is to be ; for, of course, to her all places will be alike for some time to come with her *carissimo sposo* ; but what say *you* to my proposition ? I have suggested, that as during the mission of Ernest to the English Court, our rock-seated castle on the Rhine is vacant, the two turtle doves should make it their abode until they weary of it, and of each other ; and I can assure you that its domestic traditions are highly respectable, as I endured my matrimonial solitude there with

perfect philosophy on a similar occasion for the awful space of eight months ; and there, too, my darling Carl was born. And, by-the-bye, I must introduce you to Carl. My husband and I had our first and only—what shall I call it ? our first and only altercation—bah ! it is an ugly word—on the subject of his name ; but as I was assured that the heirs of the Reigenbachs had been alternately Carls and Ernests for the last two hundred years, I was obliged to yield ; and Carl my sweet one was consequently called.”

“ And very properly ;” said the countess.

“ Oh, mamma takes Reigenbach’s part on all occasions ;” laughed the little baroness ; “ and she is right, quite right ; for he would not have accepted the Embassy to England had it not been that he knew how I pined to find myself once more within reach of my family.” And as she spoke, she laid her hand upon the bell. It was beautiful to see the exultation of the girl-mother, as she took from the arms of the nurse her first-born boy, a lovely cherub of some four months old ; who, half hidden in costly lace and em-

broidered cambric, opened his large blue eyes, and held out his dimpled arms to meet her eager embrace.

“*Mien lieben sohn!*” murmured the soft voice of the baroness, as she clasped him to her bosom; while Matilda, springing from her seat, darted to her side.

“There!” said the baroness, as she partly relaxed her grasp, and held him towards the delighted girl; “Is he not a perfect beauty? Did you ever see such eyes? Such a dear, lovely face? And look at his tiny hands and feet, are they not exquisite? Even Elwood admits that he never saw so lovely a babe.”

“I am quite sure that *I* never did;” was the reply of Matilda, as the child was transferred to her own care: “I never imagined such a cherub.”

The lips of the baroness were in a second pressed to the cheek of her young friend; “I shall love you, I am sure I shall;” she said, as her bright eyes danced with delight; “and he is *so* good, *so* loving—but give him back to me—quick—quick—for here is Algernon.”

As she spoke Lord Elwood entered the room with a casket in his hand, which he placed in that of his mother.

“Matilda ;” said the countess ;—“for as you are so soon to become my daughter, I will not call you Miss Ashton, you are, as my son has assured me, perfectly aware that he is not at present in the worldly position suited to his rank. I know that he is incapable of deceit, and that you are consequently prepared for some years of comparative probation ; but believe me when I assure you, my fair girl, that those years cannot prove otherwise than salutary to you both. You will have time each to appreciate the sterling qualities of the other, an opportunity too often denied to persons in your position ; and which will in all probability decide the whole after-tenor of your lives.”

“Oh, madam ;” faltered out Matilda ; “you forget that I bring him nothing.”

The countess drew her to her bosom. “You bring him much, or I am greatly mistaken ;” she said gently : “I am no worldly mother, Matilda ; and I desire for my son

only such a home as was once my own ; a home of peace and affection, of love and truth." She paused for an instant, and her fine eyes were suffused with tears ; then suddenly touching the spring of the casket in her hand, she held it towards the delighted girl and continued rapidly ; " Here are the Elwood diamonds, Matilda. As the affianced wife of Algeron they are now your property ; take them, and may your brow never burn, and your heart never throb beneath their brilliancy. From generation to generation they have been worn by the Countess of Elwood, and never has one of their wearers had cause to blush as she looked upon them."

Instinctively Matilda sank upon her knees on the crimson cushion which supported the feet of the venerable countess, and buried her face in her lap ; she made no effort to possess herself of the magnificent jewels which sparkled in the sunshine ; but for the first time a deep feeling of the responsibility that she was about to undertake grew up within her, as the solemn tones of the aged lady fell upon her ears.

Lady Harriette was, however, by no means so passive; she rose eagerly to examine the costly contents of the casket, and was voluble in her expressions of admiration, to the evident satisfaction of the baroness; but her raptures exceeded in some degree the bounds of good breeding, and although strangely at variance with Lady Harriette Ashton's accustomed self-control and sense of dignity, were altogether unheeded alike by the countess and Matilda. The hands of the old lady were clasped, and rested on the head of her future daughter-in-law, over whom she bent fondly, but still somewhat mournfully. Here was her successor; the woman who was to bear her name, to fill her place, and to sustain the dignity of a long-descended family. What did not that moment involve in which she sanctioned the choice of her son, and resigned her own right to be the first in his affections? She believed that he had chosen wisely and well; she did not dare to doubt it; but he was her only son, and her existence was bound up in his. She had given away her daughters, and she had done so anxiously and even reluctantly; but the strug-

gle was sorer here, for Elwood was her only son, the idol of her heart, the representative of a long line of time-honoured ancestors ; and all these considerations pressed upon her more vividly as Matilda knelt at her feet than they had ever previously done. She rallied, however, as Lady Harriette replaced the last ornament in the casket, and looking towards the young peer motioned him to her side, and placed the hand of Matilda within his.

“Forgive me, Elwood ;” she said, forcing a smile ; “I should not have permitted myself on such an occasion to indulge in memories, which however sweet they may be, are nevertheless sad ; love her, my dear boy, as I was loved ; and never forget that the happiness of a woman’s life is a sacred trust. Guard her from the world ; strengthen her by your affection ; be her friend under all circumstances, even should you sometimes find cause to differ from her in opinion, or even practice ; and rest assured she will then seek no other.”

“I will, mother ; I will.”

“I have faith in your promise ; and you, Matilda, you love him, do you not ?”

A smile and a blush answered her.

“Let not that love grow cool, my child ; and should a doubt or a misgiving ever cross your mind that your love is amply returned, go to your husband with that doubt, but bestow no confidence elsewhere. Be to each other, as you are about to pledge yourselves to be, all and everything ; and you may then defy the world. And now we will sermonise no longer. Elwood is growing impatient, and I must not sadden you, my sweet child.”

It was in vain, however, that in obedience to the summons of her mother, Matilda endeavoured to interest herself in the family diamonds ; and it was only the sallies of the sprightly young baroness, and the caresses of her beautiful babe, which ultimately succeeded in recalling a smile to the lips of the awe-stricken girl.

Before Lady Harriette took leave of their new friends, it was arranged that the countess and her daughter should drive to Ashton Court on the following day in order to make the acquaintance of Sir Hercules, whose gout had incapacitated him from paying his respects at

The Chase ; and for the first time Matilda somewhat reluctantly saw Lord Elwood spring into the carriage to accompany them home. Her heart was so full that she longed to be alone to ponder over the words to which she had so lately listened. Until that moment she had never looked beyond the delight of being beloved by the only man who had ever touched her heart, and awakened her feelings ; her own mother had never spoken to her of the grave duties which would devolve upon her as a wife ; and she began almost to doubt if she were worthy to undertake them. Could the young peer have read her thoughts during that drive, and have comprehended her beautiful humility, and the yearnings of her pure fresh spirit, he would have loved her more devotedly than ever.

Hitherto he had known her all sunshine and buoyancy ; but he had yet to learn that in a true woman's heart there are depths beyond depths which can be sounded only by time and trial ; and that in the lowest deep lie treasures for which the world can offer no equivalent.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MARRIAGE.

IF the Countess of Elwood had been somewhat disappointed at the impression produced upon her by Lady Harriette Ashton on their first meeting, such was far from being the case when she took leave of Sir Hercules.

“Algernon ;” she had said to her son, when full of his future projects, as they drove towards Ashton Court, he, as he ever did, turned to her for sympathy and counsel ; “I trust that I shall prove a better mother to your sweet young wife than the worldly woman who has hitherto alone claimed that title. I regret to feel that Lady Harriette and myself are never likely to have one sentiment in common.”

On their return she spontaneously exclaimed :
“ I am delighted with Sir Hercules, Elwood :
he is the very model of a noble old English
gentleman ; frank, courteous, and rightminded.
He does not, like his wife, shrink from acknow-
ledging that his imprudence has impaired his
means ; and that he has involuntarily injured
the interests of his children. His principles
are evidently sound and wholesome ; and while
Lady Harriette, in her poor and narrow ambi-
tion, is running after shadows, and seeking to
gloss over unpleasant facts by false seeming, her
husband has looked his circumstances steadily
in the face, and has resolutely adopted the only
measures by which they may be repaired. Nor
is this all. While Lady Harriette was dilating
upon the social position of her son, and expa-
tiating upon the advantages which must neces-
sarily accrue from his rank, I observed that the
baronet never uttered a sentence on the sub-
ject. Perhaps she thought that by indulging
in those comments she was flattering my ma-
ternal pride. If so, she altogether mistakes
my character, and overlooks my experience ;
for my noble boy would have been as dear to

me, and I should have considered him as much entitled to win the wife he sought had he been Mr. Algernon Elwood as I do now ; while we both know, my son, that a high-sounding name is rather a hindrance than a help under many circumstances."

"We do indeed ;" was the reply, as a dark shadow flitted for an instant across the fine features of the young peer.

"I fear ;" pursued the countess with a quiet smile ; "that Sir Hercules and I have contrived most thoroughly to thwart one of the darling schemes of his wife, who was preparing to invite half the country to your marriage, and to display the young peeress and her diamonds to her multitudinous acquaintance ; as we have agreed that for many reasons which you will understand as well as myself, it will be much better to avoid all display ; and as you intend starting for Italy the day of your marriage, we have decided, should you approve our plan, that the only wedding-guest shall be the good rector who will perform the ceremony, save indeed the village poor, who will utter more hearty and sincere

prayers for your happiness than all the gentry of the county.”

“I not only approve your plan, my dear mother ;” said Lord Elwood, as he bent down and kissed her brow ; “but I thank you most sincerely for sparing me all the desecration—I can consider it in no other light—which usually takes place on similar occasions. What have strangers in common with the deep and solemn feelings with which every right-thinking man or woman must regard the most important act of their existence? There is something revolting in the idea of collecting a crowd to pry into your secret soul, and lay bare its holiest emotions. Surely, if there be a time when you should be alone in your happiness, between the old ties which have been dear to you throughout life, and the fresh one which is about to gladden it, it is on the day when you assume a new responsibility, and enter upon new duties ; and once more, my dear mother, I thank you that you have seen and felt all this. Matilda will require no diamonds at the altar to make her lovely in my eyes ; and such a

display would appear to me no better than a mockery."

"You are right;" said the countess; "the custom which has made a festivity of the most serious action of our lives, is a bad, a mistaken, and a vulgar one; nor can I conceive how any pure-minded young girl, who would shrink from exhibiting herself as a public gaze at any other time, should willingly permit such an exhibition at her marriage. These are conventionalisms which, when seriously considered, are sad anomalies."

"Then we are quite agreed;" replied the young peer: "and I have now a proposition to make to you in my turn. I will be frank enough to confess that the project would never have emanated from me; and that in fact I would rather it had not occurred to Matilda; but, as it is her first request, and perhaps a very natural wish on her part, I am anxious that she should not be disappointed."

"Well—" said the countess attentively, as he paused.

"She has entreated me to allow Florence to accompany us to Italy."

Lady Elwood looked grave.

"I am not, as you are well aware, particularly partial to Miss Ashton;" pursued her son: "she is too faithful a transcript of her mother; but as I shall carefully watch over my young wife, I apprehend no ill effects from the prolonged companionship of a few months."

The countess made no direct reply; but said quietly after the silence of a few seconds: "In that case, Algernon, as you wish me to remain at The Chace until your return, I shall, after the departure of your sister, rely for companionship upon that superb-looking girl Ella, who appears to me to be as amiable and unassuming as she is handsome."

"She is certainly very beautiful;" said Lord Elwood; "but too *grandiose* for my taste. I would not give my Matilda's sparkling eyes and blushing cheek for all her wondrous perfections."

"Nevertheless, my lord;" exclaimed the little baroness archly: "She is magnificent! I never saw such a woman; and I shall take

care not to introduce *M. le Ministre* at Ashton Court."

"Her heart is already bestowed, Louisa:" laughed the young peer.

"Ah, bah! heart indeed! Who ever talks of hearts in good society? Nerves if you please; *that* is an admissible subject in all circles; but hearts have long gone out of fashion."

Greatly to the mortification of Lady Harriette all her objections to the private marriage were overruled by the countess and Sir Hercules; the former cared little for the comments of the world, and the latter was totally indifferent to them. The diamonds were left in their casket; the white satin and Brussels lace of which the mother of the future peeress had fondly dreamed were unbought; and the two fair sisters appeared on the wedding morning in simple dresses of pure white muslin, with a few sprays of jasmin wreathed in their luxuriant hair. Vainly had the several members of both families, including Matilda herself, urged Lady Harriette to allow Ella to officiate as her second brides-

maid ; a positive refusal had been uttered in every instance. There could be no necessity, she declared, for so supererogatory a personage at a marriage of that description ; and, even, had it been otherwise, Ella's presence would be required by her uncle while the rest of the party were at church.

Horace was bitterly indignant, but he disdained to sue as a favor for his cousin that which he considered to be her rightful privilege ; while he found comfort in convincing himself by the expression of Ella's countenance that the question was one totally without importance to herself.

The ancient and ivygrown church stood in the midst of its quiet burial-ground, not a hundred yards from the park gate, and it was consequently determined that the little procession should reach it on foot. The morning was bright and beautiful ; song-birds filled the air with their melody ; the sunshine lay warm upon the grassy glades, and twinkled like a myriad stars upon the calm surface of the lake ; all nature seemed to rejoice in the happiness of the lovers ; and when they were met by the

children of the parish-school who strewed flowers in their path, Matilda whispered to her brother, upon whose arm she was leaning : “ Oh ! Horace, is not this better, far better, than a throng of scarcely-recognised faces ; see how happy these poor children are : they will be the best wedding-guests after all.”

Horace affectionately pressed her hand ; he quite coincided in her opinion.

At the door of the sacred edifice they were met by the venerable rector, who was an old and tried friend of Sir Hercules ; yet still as she glanced at him, Lady Harriette sighed as deeply as though some heavy grief had fallen upon her. The lawn sleeves had vanished with the white satin and Brussels lace ; and her daughter, the future Countess of Elwood, was about to be married by a mere parish priest !

Nevertheless, the service was most solemnly and impressively performed ; and when the little party turned from the altar and whispered their congratulations to the bride, the countenance of Florence, even in her simple white dress, was radiant with smiles. Permission had been granted by her parents that she

should accompany the newly-married pair to Italy ; and mortified vanity had been silenced by eager anticipation. The baronet had acceded to the request of his son-in-law because he felt how much the companionship of her sister would tend to mitigate the sorrow of Matilda on this, her first parting from her family ; while Lady Harriette could scarcely conceal her delight as she at once began to speculate upon the “opportunities” which Florence would thus enjoy of displaying her beauty and accomplishments beyond the reach of her cousin’s rivalry.

Deep and solemn was the blessing uttered by the baronet over his child as she knelt before him with her husband at her side ; and close and convulsive was the clasp with which he held her to his heart. He had never felt how dear she was to him until he was about to lose her. Even the laughter-loving little baroness turned aside to conceal a tear which she could not repress ; and meanwhile the hostess, who professed to detest “scenes,” was sweeping through the several apartments to the serious hindrance of the busy servants,

constantly inquiring if all the Countess of Elwood's luggage had been properly packed on the carriage? If the Countess of Elwood's wraps had been carefully arranged? She was, in short, a model mother in her anxiety about the new peeress. In due time, Mr. Anstruther arrived; and Sir Hercules having been wheeled into the dining-room, the party took their seats at the table; but the repast was far from a gay one, although the rector talked cheerfully of the return of the young couple to their home as though the pang of parting must not first be endured; and the venerable countess jested at her own dowagership. And yet no heart sank like her's. She could not forget that she had given the happiness of her only son into the keeping of another, and that "her home was left unto her desolate." Even Sir Hercules had still children about him to gladden his old age; but now her last and best-beloved had followed the example of his sisters, and found a dearer tie.

"You must often lend me Ella to cheer my solitude;" she said, forcing a smile; "that is, of course, if she will not take fright at my

loneliness ; and that you, my dear Sir Hercules, can consent to spare her."

"Not only with pleasure, but with gratitude;" replied the baronet ; "for the change cannot be otherwise than highly beneficial to her ; and the old Court will be gloomy enough when these two dear girls are gone."

Lady Harriette uttered no comment either on the request of her guest, or the assent of her husband ; she only bowed rather stiffly, and again looked down upon her plate.

The minutes lengthened into hours, and suddenly Lord Elwood's travelling-carriage with its four high-bred bays whirled up to the door.

"*So soon !*" exclaimed Matilda, bursting into tears ; but at the same instant her hand was clasped in that of her bridegroom, and she hastily strove to wipe them away. All was now bustle and confusion ; and every face looked grave save that of Florence, whose heart was so overflowed with happiness that for once she could not succeed in concealing her feelings.

"Matilda, take care of Algernon ;" was the

parting whisper of the baroness, whose buoyant spirits had failed as she remarked the struggle of her mother to control her emotion ; “ even you do not know how precious he is.”

“ Elwood ;” murmured the agitated old lady, as her son folded his arms about her ; “ my own darling boy, my heart will be full of prayer for you until your return. My noble Algernon, my blessing goes with you.”

“ I know it : I feel it ;” was the half-choking reply ; “ and never were you more dear to me than at this moment.”

“ My children ; my dear, dear children ;” almost gasped the baronet, as he successively embraced his daughters, “ come back to me ere long, or perchance—” a sob checked his utterance, and Lord Elwood with gentle violence led Matilda from the room.

We will no longer linger over the parting. Lady Harriette was calmly affectionate, and murmured a few words in the ear of Florence, to which the reply was a bright smile. The two young noblemen warmly shook hands ; and Ella, having taken leave of her cousins, hastened to the side of the heartstruck baronet,

whose eyes followed every motion of his daughters, until they disappeared. Then he half rose in his chair, and listened intently to the hearty cheers of the humble revellers upon the lawn, and to the sound of the carriage-wheels as they once more ground upon the gravel, until he could hear them no more ; and, finally, he sank down again with a deep sigh of utter exhaustion.

Two hours subsequently the venerable countess and her daughter, accompanied by Mr. Anstruther, were on their way to The Chase ; and the excitement of the day was over. There was merriment in the offices ; but all was still in the apartment of Sir Hercules, where he sat between his son and his niece, who strove in vain to rouse him into cheerfulness.

“I must have time, my dear children ; I must have time ;” he said sorrowfully ; “I am aware that this is a weakness in which I ought not to indulge ; but I feel to-day that I am indeed a father.”

Lady Harriette had retired to her own apartment on the departure of her guests, but not

until, like a Parthian warrior, she had shot an arrow behind her: “Every thing has gone off admirably;” had been her contemptuous remark as she withdrew; “and now we all know how an English peeress should leave her father’s house.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

Two months passed by ; and although Florence proved but a careless correspondent, both Matilda and Lord Elwood gave to their relations at home the fullest details of their proceedings. The young countess was in one perpetual trance of delight ; not a cloud had crossed the horizon of her happiness ; and she declared her sister to be more blooming and beautiful than ever. “ We were about ; ” she said in one of her letters ; “ to leave Genoa for Venice, but Florence has expressed so great a desire to remain here for another month that Algernon has consented to do so, which I rejoice should be the case as we can nowhere

find a more lovely residence. It is absolute fairy-land ; and I assure you that my undemonstrative sister has become quite romantic in her admiration of all around her, while she is herself an object of general attraction ; and all the English here are as proud of her as though her beauty were a personal triumph to each." A few weeks subsequently the heart of Lady Harriette beat high, and her cheek flushed with exultation, as she read :

"And now, my dear mamma, I must tell you that we have discovered the secret of my sister's anxiety to linger at Genoa ; she has made a conquest of the Prince of Caserno, a young and handsome Roman patrician, who was introduced to us by Sir Egerton Dove-dale—not a bad name, by-the-bye, for one who is destined to bring two lovers together. Whether Florence loves the prince I cannot tell you, but her vanity is evidently flattered, which is not wonderful, as all the Genoese ladies are enthusiastic about him. In any case make yourself easy, dear mamma, for both Elwood and myself feel all the sacredness of the trust which has been reposed in us, and

we shall naturally watch over her welfare with the greatest jealousy.”

Lady Harriette was in the seventh heaven ! An Italian prince might be a comparatively insignificant personage in his own country : but in England—in dear, self-deluding, title-loving England—it was far otherwise. Nothing could exceed her delight. She thought of the proposal—the presumptuous proposal—of Mr. Goldworthy, for the hand of her eldest and handsomest daughter, who was about to become a princess of the Roman Empire ; and her proud lip curled with indignation. Once more her dreams bid fair to be realised. One of her girls a peeress, another about to become a princess, and her only son a peer. How superbly could she trample under foot the impertinence of a mere Duchess of Windermere ! Never had she felt so happy—so exultant. There could be no doubt now of the result of this attachment, for Florence was even handsomer than she had herself been in her early womanhood ; and what had *she* not achieved even under the most complicated difficulties ? Having read the letter, she

locked it carefully in her desk ; and merely communicated to her husband the fact that all the party at Genoa were well, and so much absorbed by the gaieties of The City of Palaces that they had once more postponed their removal to Venice ; an announcement which perfectly satisfied Sir Hercules, to whom every exertion had now become so irksome that he fully entered into their wish to remain quietly where they were, as long as they found their abode there pleasant. So absorbed was Lady Harriette by the bright vision before her, (which she hugged to her heart of hearts as her own cherished secret, to be revealed to no one until it should burst upon them in the full glory of reality,) that the happy trio in the sick room were rarely disturbed by her apparition ; and when in the plenitude of her self-gratulation she did pass a few moments beside the gouty chair of the baronet, she was so conciliating, so considerate, so full of that subdued and soothing gentleness which can only spring from inward satisfaction that he ceased to shrink from her visits, or to dread her reproaches on a subject

which had already been prolific of annoyance to them both. He dismissed the most important and expensive portion of his household; sold two of his carriages, and six of his horses; while not a word of expostulation was uttered by the mother of the future princess. She even voluntarily declined invitations which she would previously have accepted with avidity, on the plea that the absence of her daughters rendered her unfit for society; and finally, she appeared wholly unconscious that the affection between Ella and her son was deepening and broadening hour by hour; and that, encouraged by the sanction of the baronet, they had become all in all to each other. One sole idea was now the principle of her existence—the aggrandisement of Florence—which must, according to her views, involve that of her whole family. No doubt of disappointment, no fear of failure in this, her darling hope, crossed her mind for an instant. She was eager for revenge upon those by whom she had been humbled; and she looked upon that revenge as certain. She trod on air; and if she were somewhat more lofty in

her demeanour than she had hitherto been, she coupled with her haughtiness none of her usual scorn.

The baronet looked upon her with a respect which he had never hitherto felt, and was grateful for the uncomplaining dignity with which she supported their reverses. He even began to believe that he had never before done justice to the nobility of her character ; and to console himself thoroughly for the absence of his daughters in the conviction that his home had not for years been so peaceful and so happy. Even yet he did not understand the nature of his wife. At the close of the fourth month came another letter from Matilda, and these were its contents :

“ I write to you with a heavy heart, my dear mamma ; and, as you will see by the post-mark, I write from Venice, where we arrived three days ago. All is over between Florence and the prince. That he loves her is certain ; and that, had his own will only had power to decide the affair, he would joyfully have become her husband ; but such, unfortunately, was not the case : for he had no sooner offered him-

self and been accepted, than Algernon insisted on his communicating the event to his family, who professed themselves perfectly satisfied with my sister's connections and position in society, but who positively refused their sanction to the marriage until they were assured of the amount of her fortune. In vain did Alessandro, who is most madly in love—of that there can be no doubt—declare that he cared nothing for aught save herself, the old principe and principessa were inexorable ; and as, of course, we would not deceive them for an instant, they at once summoned the poor young man to Rome ; while Elwood, jealous to preserve the dignity of Florence, lost no time in hurrying our own departure from scenes which could only tend to augment her suffering by constantly reminding her of the past. You will of course be anxious to hear how my poor sister has borne this trial ; and I confess that I find some difficulty in satisfying you on the point. That the pride of Florence is strong, and her ambition mortified, you will readily understand ; but if you ask me whether her heart has also suffered, I know

not what to answer. Time will show. Meanwhile, do not doubt for an instant that all which the fondest affection can effect to alleviate her disappointment will be done; nor that had Elwood possessed the power to spare her this trial he would have shrunk from any personal sacrifice. All we can do is to hope that by the time we return home she will have conquered any feeling of regard she may have entertained for the son of worldly-minded and time-serving parents, who can coldly barter the happiness of their only child for a few paltry thousands. How unlike my Algernon and *his* mother!"

Another cloud-castle melted into mist! Another dream of ambition dissolved into nothingness—Poor Lady Harriette!

Save herself, no member of the family at Ashton Court had heard a whisper of the anticipated greatness of her eldest daughter. Hitherto it had been her own secret; it was she herself, and she only, who had so trained Florence as to render her worthy of the exalted position which she was about to fill. It was she alone who had made of the obscure

child of a country baronet the bride and companion of princes ; and she had exulted in the thought. But when the illusion faded ; when the ashes of a proud future were all that remained of its fair promise ; then indeed she found a bitter satisfaction in visiting her mortification upon her husband. Scornfully, disdainfully, the tale was told. Had he not recklessly squandered the few thousands which had once been destined to form the dowry of his daughters, this shame could not have fallen upon their house—this disgrace could not have attached itself to their name. The dowry of Florence would have sufficed, amply sufficed, to meet the exigencies of the case ; and now, what was her position ? An attachment so fervent and so undisguised as that of the prince of Caserno must have been patent in all the good society in Genoa ; and thus her hopes of an eligible establishment in Italy were at an end !

Sir Hercules was fairly deluged by the avalanche of words which were poured out upon him ; and, in his first bewilderment, was scarcely able to decide whether he had really

himself to blame or not for the portionless position of his daughter ; and when his wife was ultimately borne from his room in violent hysterics, he sank back feebly in his chair with a look of helplessness which pierced Ella to the very heart.

How powerless she felt, poor girl ! to alleviate that deep and wordless grief.

CHAPTER XIX.

A BETROTHAL.

LATER accounts from Italy were still more melancholy. The lover of Florence had escaped the vigilance of his parents, and had made his appearance in Venice; where, without the knowledge of Lord and Lady Elwood, he had succeeded in meeting her. The effect of this imprudence had been very great upon Miss Ashton, who had decidedly bestowed all the heart she had to give upon the romantic young Italian. But when he urged her to fly with him, her mother's lessons rose to her memory, and the school in which she had been tutored was not one of self-sacrifice. She had already learnt enough to be aware that the

house of Caserno was as poor as it was proud ; and that although its root had struck deep into the soil, its branches were far from flourishing.

That a clandestine marriage would destroy all the prospects of Alessandro until the death of his parents she well knew ; and what must be her fate meanwhile ? In the palmy days of her father's fortunes she would not have hesitated for an instant ; for, little as she had appreciated that father's worth, she had nevertheless read his heart, and she knew that he would never have cast her off ; but now—with the parting words of her mother ringing in her ears—the warning assurance that, should she not profit by the opportunity of her foreign sojourn to further her own prospects, she would return only to a home of privation and obscurity—she could not suggest such a project to the noble-looking being who knelt before her, weeping the hot tears of passion, and suing to her for pity.

The struggle between her ambition and her pride was a bitter one ; but how could she talk to him of an impoverished home, and a

social insignificance, from which his high spirit would have shrunk with indignation? They parted; but Florence had not strength of character to support such a trial; and her health had failed beneath the severe revulsion of feeling.

“We are about to remove her to Nice for a time;” wrote Matilda; “and trust that change of air and scene may tend to restore her. In any case Algernon has resolved to do so, as it will separate her from Alessandro, who, in his mad frenzy, is capable of any extravagance. Poor Florence! and to think that five or six thousand pounds would secure her happiness. I cannot tell you how many tears our crippled means have cost me for her sake.”

Thus all was over; and Lady Harriette had only to submit to her untoward fate with as good a grace as she could assume.

It is pitiable to feel how often the brazen idol of ambition crushes out in its Juggernaut course the spirit of its worshippers.

Precisely at this period Horace was apprised that, the lawyers having completed their task, the marriage-day of his friend Hather-

ston had been fixed, and that his presence at the ceremony was earnestly desired, not only by himself but also by the Duke and Duchess of Windermere. Disborough smiled as he read the assurance; and although every event which now separated him from Ella was unwelcome, he nevertheless at once resolved to obey the summons. On learning this determination the indignation of Lady Harriette knew no bounds. She denounced the invitation of Frank as insulting after his conduct to Florence, and the invitation of the ducal pair as an impertinence; but she did not induce either her husband or her son to adopt her opinion.

“If Hatherston, on a closer acquaintance, felt satisfied that Florence was not the woman calculated to render him happy, he acted like a man of honor;” said the baronet; “and, indeed, from all that I have been able to understand, it appears to me extremely doubtful that he ever had an idea of the kind; while neither Florence herself nor any member of her family has a right to assume that he did so, when, even from your own statement, he never

uttered a word on the subject; but, subsequently, by offering his hand to her cousin, proved that he considered himself perfectly unshackled."

"And, of course, the Duke and Duchess of Windermere and their estimable daughter are equally honourable;" sneered his wife.

"They are strangers to me, and I am consequently not prepared to vindicate their conduct;" replied the baronet; "but I consider that Horace owes it to himself to prove to all the parties concerned his total indifference to the transfer of Lady Constance Trevor's affection from himself to his friend. To him there can be no mortification in seeing her give her hand to Hatherston; while, as a matter of feeling, you are well aware that nothing could have been more consonant to his own wishes than that she should bestow herself elsewhere."

"The Earl of Disborough will enact a very dignified part at the ceremony;" retorted his wife bitterly; "and it will be a pleasant triumph for the duchess to exhibit her

daughter's discarded suitor in her bridal train."

"You forget, my dear mother;" said Horace with a smile; "that as I never sued, I cannot consider myself in the same light that you do. Rely on it that I shall be one of the gayest guests at Frank's wedding, and shall sport the orange-blossoms instead of the willow."

Lady Harriette disdained any further argument, and the young earl a day or two subsequently proceeded to London.

We will not trouble our readers with a description of the pompous marriage over which Lady Harriette wept tears of rage as she lingered upon its details in the columns of the *Morning Post*. She seemed to see the eight titled bridesmaids in white and silver; to hear the Bishop of —— proclaim her intended daughter-in-law and her coveted son-in-law man and wife; to feel the crush of the aristocratic crowd, and to be blinded by the glare of jewels. The courtly and complacent paper dwelt with evident enjoyment on every particular; and not content with the public

portion of the ceremony, followed the bride even to her home; catalogued her *trousseau*; enumerated her wedding presents; told where, and by whom, the almost regal diamonds with which she was adorned had been mounted under the direction of her bridegroom; and finally informed its readers of the interesting fact that "the noble and happy couple, immediately after partaking with their patrician friends of the most splendid breakfast ever laid down by Gunter, left Town for Windermere Castle, followed by the earnest good wishes of all who had the honor to be present."

This was a blow indeed, and the poor lady actually writhed under it! She who had trusted to make the well-known husband-hunting propensity of the Duchess of Windermere subserve to her own views, had proved herself a mere tyro in social tactics when pitted against the astuteness of Her Grace; and more bitterly than ever did she regret the failure of her hopes regarding Florence. Why was she not with her daughter when the prince proposed to her to fly with him? How could Florence be mad enough

to suffer any question of money to come between her and such exalted rank? What were Elwood and Matilda thinking of to remove from Genoa at a moment when all might have been arranged?

Lady Harriette was positively wretched.

The rebound of her aunt's mortification fell heavily upon Ella. Hitherto she had been permitted to visit The Chase whenever the pony-carriage of the dowager was sent with a request that she would return in it. The baroness had been summoned to Town by her husband, and the venerable countess was alone in the stately mansion with her melancholy memories. Thus the society of the orphan had become very precious to her, and she had availed herself of it with eagerness; but Lady Harriette, brooding over what she considered as her wrongs, was at war with all the world, and in no mood to administer to the sick fancies of an invalid husband. Time after time, therefore, from the period when she ascertained the marriage of Lady Constance Trevor, with all its attendant pomp and pageantry, the little equipage returned empty,

until Lady Elwood at length forbore any further entreaty; and Ella found herself once more a prisoner within the walls of Ashton Court. In vain did Sir Hercules expostulate, and declare that he would rather forego her care, gentle and unremitting as it was, than deprive her of an enjoyment so great as the society of the amiable countess; he was constantly met by the assurance of his wife that her own health was so much shaken by the perpetual annoyances to which she had recently been subjected that she was quite unequal to the exertion requisite in a sick room; and this assertion was not altogether unwarranted; for like all imperious women thwarted in their views and wishes, Lady Harriette had undeniably fretted herself into a state of nervous irritation as trying to herself as it was to those about her.

The return of Horace amply compensated, however, to Ella for the disappointment thus inflicted upon her; and while Lady Harriette shut herself for hours in her own private sitting-room, the trio in the sick chamber passed their time quietly and happily, caring

nothing for the comments of the world about them. How pale and poor appeared to Disborough the vapid splendours in which he had lately been a partaker as he gazed into the deep, wondrous eyes of the orphan; or watched her, as with graceful movements, every one of which would have been a study for an artist, she hovered about his suffering father; how tame the music of hired minstrels and far-famed *prime donne* as he listened to the tones of her soft and harmonious voice.

It was a strange wooing, that of Horace and Ella, and none save themselves knew half its sweetness; it was an union of souls with which no outward influence could intermeddle; a pure and perfect knowledge of each other's characters and tastes usually unattainable by betrothed lovers; for betrothed they were, and with the sanction of Sir Hercules; who smilingly declared that, as the projects of his wife all failed in succession, he felt himself bound to take the family interests into his own hands.

"And rely on it, Horace;" he said cheer-

fully ; “all peer of the realm as you are, you will find that your old father is your best friend at last, and has a better present to make to you than a high-sounding name.”

Disborough stretched out his hand to his cousin ; “How say you, Ella ;” he asked ; “Is my father right ?”

The orphan answered with a smile ; and such a smile ! He sought no other reply. And thus they were betrothed.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CASKET.

ANOTHER letter arrived from Italy, but on this occasion it was written by Lord Elwood to Sir Hercules. Florence had so entirely abandoned herself to her grief that her health was rapidly declining, and the physicians had declared her removal to England in her present state of languor and depression utterly impossible. Matilda, who blamed herself as the cause of all that had occurred, from her having complied with the entreaties of her sister, and urged her parents to allow her to leave home, was inconsolable; while Elwood himself was scarcely less wretched, the delicate situation of his wife alarming him not only for

her own safety but also for that of his expected heir. It was evident that all was terror and dismay at Nice.

“Ichabod, Ichabod, my glory is departed;” said the soul-stricken old man, as he passed the letter to his son; “My hair is grey, and my strength well-nigh spent; and must I still live on to see my children go down into the grave before me—and this by my own act and deed—by my own weakness and want of moral energy? I am now poor indeed. But this child, this heart-wrung, suffering child must be saved. Horace! You love the old house as I do—for generations it has been the home of our race, but it can continue so no longer. Florence must not die—What say you, my son?”

“That I am ready to subscribe to all your wishes, sir; that your will is mine; only state those wishes and that will, and they shall be obeyed.”

The baronet bowed his head upon his breast, and his chest heaved convulsively. “I see no other resource;” he said at length in a voice so broken that it sent a thrill to the

hearts of his listeners; "There is no time for delay; my poor, poor children! Send for Saunders; he has already told me that—that—Goldworthy—" the voice suddenly ceased; and the sufferer fell back in his chair insensible.

The grief of the young is sometimes bitter, but the sorrow of the aged is very, very piteous; and the more so that the grey head and the palsied frame are unequal to the trial forced upon them. Neither Ella nor Horace uttered a cry or shed a tear: the suffering before them was too solemn for any selfish indulgence. Gently and piously they raised the bent form, and arranged the nerveless limbs; and then without exchanging a word, they busied themselves in applying the restoratives which they deemed likely to prove efficacious in such an emergency, until they were at length rewarded by symptoms of restored consciousness in their beloved charge. Sir Hercules opened his eyes, drew a long breath, gazed at them with a wandering smile which was sadder than any sigh, and ultimately, without even attempting to speak,

laid his head upon the shoulder of Ella, and fell into a heavy and death-like sleep. Thus was he still lying when an hour subsequently the now infrequent sound of carriage-wheels was heard without, and a peal at the house-bell resounded through the hall, abruptly breaking in upon the silence of the sick-room ; but Sir Hercules never stirred a limb.

Ella looked up appealingly to her cousin.

“Have you nerve to remain beside him alone?” was the whispered interrogatory.

She bent her head in silence.

“I will then go and inquire ;” he said, in the same subdued tone in which he had last spoken ; “In any case, *he* must not be disturbed.”

As he ceased speaking Horace disappeared, and the orphan continued her weary and anxious watch.

It was long before Disborough returned, and when he did so he was evidently in a state of considerable excitement ; “Ella,” he said tenderly ; “my own brave, self-sacrificing Ella ; it is now my turn to watch alone. Go,

my own love ; the arrival is none other than your faithful ayah."

For an instant the orphan was breathless with emotion, but in the next she smiled mournfully as she murmured : " Return to her, Horace ; explain to her how I am engaged ; and say——"

But the young man had no time to obey her behest, for while she was still speaking the Indian woman glided swiftly and noiselessly into the room. In an instant she was at the feet of her cherished nursling, and clinging to her knees ; while her bosom heaved with sobs which she laboured to suppress, as the disengaged hand of the orphan was laid fondly upon her head. Soon, however, with almost Spartan fortitude she mastered her emotion ; and rising from the floor, she gazed earnestly into the face of the baronet for several seconds ; then, drawing from the folds of the shawl that she wore about her waist a small curiously-gilt bottle, she applied a pungent essence to his nostrils which produced an almost instantaneous effect. Sir Hercules moved restlessly in his chair, swept his hand across his

forehead, and murmured a few inarticulate sounds. Then he stretched himself languidly, and breathed a long deep sigh like one who is awaking from a painful dream ; and, finally, he looked round him with a glance of perfect intelligence.

“ My dear, dear father ; you are better now, are you not ? ” anxiously inquired Horace.

“ Well—quite well, my son ; ” was the faintly - uttered reply ; “ but I have slept uneasily.”

“ We have prepared a surprise for your waking ; ” said Horace cheerfully ; and he pointed to where Ella was sitting with her arms folded about her faithful nurse.

This sudden apparition thoroughly roused the baronet, who warmly extended his hand to the Indian woman ; “ You are welcome, Diana ; ” he said tremulously ; “ you are very welcome. You never should have left us.”

“ And the Beebee ? ” exclaimed the ayah, with flashing eyes ; “ the Begum— ? ”

“ Fear not ; you will be welcome to her also ; ” said Disborough soothingly : “ you see that your nursling is no longer a child.”

“Sahib, yes.” And the devoted woman gazed at the orphan with an expression of triumphant joy which made the heart of Horace throb, and his breath falter ; “Dia is old, very old ;” she continued after a pause ; “but heart young for piccaninny—never forget piccaninny—always lub piccaninny.”

“I dare be sworn you have !” exclaimed the young man, as his whole soul was revealed in the expression of his countenance.

“H——a !” breathed out the Indian woman in a long suspiration as a shadow passed over her brow ; “*my* piccaninny—*mine*—”

“And so she shall be, Diana ;” smiled Horace ; “but you must allow her to be mine also.”

The ayah turned sharply upon Ella.

“I love him, Diana ;” murmured the orphan, replying to this silent appeal.

“And the Beebee ?—the Begum ?”—repeated the pertinacious Indian.

She received no answer.

A smile of scornful pride rose to her lip ; but in her turn she remained silent.

“You must be weary, my good Diana, and

need rest ;” said Disborough ; “ I will go and give orders for your comfort.”

“ I cannot part with her to-night, Horace ;” said Ella ; “ I must once more sleep upon her bosom, as I have so often done. For a few hours I shall be again a happy child. Oh ! it all looks like a strange dream ;” and, with a wild burst of tears, she threw herself upon the bosom of the faithful woman who had been to her in her childhood as a second mother.

In the midst of her joy, however, Ella became painfully aware that the shock which her uncle had received had produced very serious consequences. Although visibly cognisant of what was passing around him, he appeared after the first instant to take little interest in any thing ; and speedily fell back into the torpor or syncope from which the ayah had aroused him.

“ We must have advice, Horace ; and at once !” exclaimed the orphan, as she sprang from the arms of her nurse to the side of the sufferer.

“ I will mount my horse, and gallop over to —— without the loss of an instant ;” was

the hurried reply of Disborough, as he saw with consternation a strange and alarming expression settle upon the features of his father.

“Good, sahib ; good ;” said the Indian woman, who instantly forgetting her own fatigue began to busy herself about the person of the invalid. In five minutes the cushions of the baronet were arranged so skillfully that his breath became less laboured, and the purple flush which had terrified Ella lost a portion of its intensity. Not for an instant did she dream of summoning Lady Harriette ; the thought of her, in fact, never entered her mind. She was wholly absorbed by terror.

An hour went by, during which, assisted most zealously by the ayah, she bathed the forehead and hands of her uncle with Hungary water, and still he remained motionless.

“Diana, my own Diana, will my dear good uncle die ?” she murmured almost inaudibly.

An ominous gesture answered her.

“No, no ;” she passionately exclaimed. “It cannot, must not be ! Is there no help ? None ?”

The ayah reverently pointed upward.

“True ;” said the poor girl sinking upon her knees ; “There we may find help indeed.”

It came. The sharp clatter of horses’ hoofs rang out ; quick steps were heard crossing the hall ; and Horace entered the room, followed by the family apothecary.

“Comfort yourself, young lady ;” he said, after a rapid examination of his patient ; “It is not yet too late, but we have not a moment to spare. A copious bleeding will, I trust and believe, restore Sir Hercules. Had you not better leave the room, and confide him to my care, and that of this good woman, who is evidently an excellent nurse ?”

“I cannot ;” gasped out the orphan ; “Do not send me away.”

“You shall remain if you wish it ;” said the energetic practitioner, who had already ripped open the sleeve of the baronet’s dressing-gown, and was bandaging his arm ; “but are you quite sure that you will be equal to the undertaking ?”

“Perhaps, my own love—” commenced Horace in a low anxious whisper ; but as he

saw the look of anguish in the pale face that was upturned to his he did not conclude the sentence ; and in another instant the Indian woman, who was fortunately a Christian, and consequently without any of the prejudices of caste general among her people, was kneeling before the invalid and receiving in a basin the blood which was slowly falling drop by drop from the punctured vein. Once, despite his habitual caution, the surgeon suffered a gesture of discouragement to escape him, and those around him shuddered with apprehension ; but as shortly afterwards the crimson tide flowed more freely, and the countenance of the operator revealed his satisfaction, hope once more sprang up within their hearts. Symptoms of reviving animation supervened ; but, although his physical energies recovered somewhat of their usual tone, the mental faculties of the baronet were still torpid.

“ Sir Hercules must have undergone a severe moral shock, my lord ;” said the surgeon, who had striven in vain to awaken him from his intellectual stupor.

“ He has.”

“I fear in that case nothing short of an equally violent access of joy will rouse him from the torpor into which he has fallen.”

Horace sank upon the sofa, and buried his face in his hands.

“Can you suggest nothing?” asked Mr. Compton anxiously; “It will require a violent effort to counteract this attack.”

Horace shook his head despondingly.

“The box!” almost shrieked Ella, as she sprang from her seat; “my poor uncle was constantly pining for its arrival. Diana, where is the box?”

The ayah pointed towards the hall, and as she did so Sir Hercules once more moved nervously in his chair.

“The box is come, uncle: the box is here;” murmured the orphan as she raised his head upon her arm. “Shall we open it?”

The eyelids of the baronet quivered, and his lips trembled, but he gave no further sign of mental consciousness.

“Do you anticipate any important result from the box to which you allude, Miss Ashton?” enquired the surgeon.

“I do not know—I cannot say—but it is our last hope.”

“Open it then by all means, and at any risk. Shall I withdraw while you do so?”

“On no account, Mr. Compton;” said Lord Disborough: “You are an old friend of the family; and the secret, if secret there be, concerns only my poor father’s brother who has been dead many years.”

“But the key;” suddenly exclaimed Ella; “I heard from my uncle that the key was lost.”

As she spoke a hand was laid softly on her arm, and turning to ascertain the cause of the pressure she saw the Indian woman slowly unrolling the folds of her crimson turban; from whence she withdrew a key of singular form and workmanship.

“What means this, Diana?” demanded Horace abruptly.

“Dia go back to Calcutta;” said the Indian woman; “Dia go to bungalow of Sahib, find him key—Begum key. Dia keep him to make memory. See box; Begum box; Dia bring key and box to piccaninny.”

“You are my good genius, Diana ;” said the orphan affectionately ; “well indeed might I grieve for you. And now quick, Horace, quick. Uncle, dear uncle, we are about to open the box.”

Again Sir Hercules writhed upon his seat, and his features quivered.

“We have struck the right chord ;” whispered the surgeon : “It is evident that this box, whatever it may contain, is an object of great interest to him. Lose no time in following up this first symptom of recovery, faint and partial as it is.”

The small iron-clamped chest was brought into the room by a servant who was immediately dismissed, and Ella, still holding the key, rapidly approached it ; but the effort was beyond her strength. As she bent down towards the lock she remembered whose hand had last closed it—how much depended upon what it might reveal—and with an appealing look she turned to Horace.

“My poor Ella !” murmured the young man : “Give the key to Diana, its long and faithful guardian ; and lean on me. Indeed

you are unequal to the trial to which you would fain expose yourself."

The weeping girl did as she was bidden; and the Indian woman at once applied the key to the lock, which from long disuse resisted her efforts for a time.

"I do not regret this:" said Mr. Compton, who stood with his finger upon the pulse of the baronet; "there is evidently an awakening of something like mental connection. The idea is still vague, but I have good hope that it is growing into form. Earnestly do I trust that the result may be favorable to our patient."

At length the task of the ayah was accomplished, and the lid of the chest fell back with a dull heavy sound. A tremor shook the frame of the baronet, but his eyes remained closed.

"Empty it, Diana," said Lord Disborough.

A shawl was first drawn out, and beneath it lay a large sealed packet which the Indian woman with some impatience flung on the floor beside her.

“Give me those papers, Diana ;” said Horace.

The ayah obeyed, and then proceeded to withdraw the other contents of the box.

These consisted of some costly articles of female apparel, over which the devoted nurse bent down her head, and wept. Long years had passed, but she still remembered them, as well as the beloved mistress whom they had once adorned. Suddenly, however, she uttered a low cry, drew in her breath forcibly, and plunging her arm once more into the chest, with some difficulty lifted out a large case of fillagreed silver ; then touching a secret spring with which she was evidently familiar, she displayed to the astonished eyes of those about her a mass of jewels of almost fabulous value.

Ella gazed at them for one instant, and only one ; in the next her arms were about the neck of the baronet, and she was gasping out : “ We are saved, uncle—Florence is saved—we are rich, very rich. Look ! look ! ”

“ Florence— ” the murmur was low and indistinct, but Sir Hercules had spoken at last.

“ Florence is coming home, uncle ; ” continued the agitated girl ; “ coming home happy—very happy—with her young bridegroom. Will you not welcome her to her home ? ”

“ Florence—home—happy— ” again faltered out the sick man.

“ Yes, yes ; we shall all be happy now. We have opened the box, uncle, and it contains papers for you.”

A trembling hand was eagerly extended ; and although it almost immediately fell again, still the effort had been made.

“ Now we shall do well ; ” said Mr. Compton ; “ You are, after all, the best physician, Miss Ashton. Do you think you could prevail upon Sir Hercules to swallow a stimulant ? ”

“ I can at least endeavour to do so.”

Gently and affectionately the orphan approached the glass to the lips of her uncle, still murmuring words of happiness ; and the draught was swallowed.

“ Ella, my child— ”

“ I am here, uncle.”

“ What—what of Florence ? ”

“Florence can marry the prince; all is well with us. My good ayah has brought us joy and wealth.”

“Joy—wealth—has Goldworthy purchased our old home?”

“Hush, hush, uncle; Florence is coming to Ashton Court with her lover—and Matilda, soon to become a mother—and Elwood—Oh, we shall once more be very, very happy.”

The sick man was evidently still bewildered, but his perception was gradually becoming clearer.

“I have been ill, Ella.”

“You have, but I trust that you are so no longer.”

“Tell me what has happened.”

Controlling her agitation by a powerful effort the orphan reminded him of the arrival of Diana, and then acquainted him with the contents of the chest.

“Yours, all yours, my child;” moaned the baronet.

“And if I am your child are they not yours also?” asked the eager girl: “perhaps, even, for we have not examined the papers——”

“Enough, Miss Ashton;” said Mr. Compton impressively: “you have nobly performed your task. It is plain that Sir Hercules could not be in better hands; but we must have no over-excitement; and I consequently forbid most peremptorily the perusal of that packet until I have again visited my patient. In ten minutes you will be good enough to give him another soothing draught: answer all his questions; even permit him, should he have sufficient strength for the purpose, to examine the magnificent contents of that casket; but do not on any account further tax his energies. I will see you early to-morrow; I should advise that Sir Hercules be now removed to his bed. Make yourself quite easy, my lord; I take my leave without one misgiving.”

CHAPTER XXI.

MOTHER AND SON.

MR. COMPTON had no sooner quitted the house than it occurred both to Horace and Ella that it was their duty to apprise Lady Harriette of all the events which had taken place since she retired to her room; and they consequently proceeded there together, leaving the ayah still weeping over the jewel-case which rested upon her knees. They found the wife of Sir Hercules established thoroughly as an invalid, stretched on a sofa, enveloped in shawls, and with her still fine and abundant hair confined under a close cap. Unaware that death had, during her selfish inaction, threatened two of her family, and

was still impending over her daughter, she had abandoned herself to one of those fits of sullenness in which she always indulged when her will had been resisted. The perusal of Lord Elwood's letter, however, appeared to affect her deeply.

"My poor Florence!" she murmured as she allowed the fatal letter to fall into her lap; "my poor lost child!"

"Let us trust, my dear mother;" said Horace, whose filial feelings were instantly awakened by the sight of her grief; "that there is still hope. Can you bear to hear more?"

Lady Harriette made a gesture of assent; and then leaning her elbow on the scroll of the sofa, and her head on her hand, she prepared to listen.

Disborough told his tale briefly; and the account of his father's alarming indisposition, softened as it was by the affectionate care of her son, produced little visible effect upon her: the baronet had long been a confirmed invalid; and his wife was quite ready to satisfy herself that her own suffering had exceeded his.

“There is then no danger, if I understand you rightly?” she asked.

“None, I am thankful to say. Compton assures me that my father will almost be himself again to-morrow.”

“My poor unhappy child!” was the irrelevant rejoinder.

“Would you not like to see my father before he composes himself to sleep?” inquired Disborough.

“For what purpose should I disturb him?” was the sharp retort; “My presence is never so productive of pleasure to Sir Hercules that I should force it upon him at such a moment.”

“In that case;” said Horace, startled by the egotism of his mother, and unable altogether to suppress his indignation; “the remainder of my story will possibly interest you more.”

Ella stood by, trembling with excitement, but she did not utter a syllable.

On learning the arrival of the ayah the brow of Lady Harriette became as black as night, but as her son related first the bene-

ficial effects which it had produced upon the baronet ; and, finally, the discovery of the silver casket, her eyes dilated and flashed, and her bosom heaved with triumph ; but suddenly she remembered that should these jewels indeed be of the great value supposed, they were still beyond her reach ; they were the property of the misused girl who stood before her ; she had no claim either upon her affection or her gratitude : and all the inherent bitterness of her nature was in arms at once.

“ You are a fortunate young lady, Miss Ella Ashton ;” she said with one of her most blighting sneers : “ you can now escape, whenever it pleases you to do so, from the monotony of Ashton Court ; and should your hopes not have deceived you and this fairy gift prove a delusion, which I confess that I think very probable, you will be able to outrival the ancient family diamonds of the Countess of Elwood, and perhaps even to outshine Lady Constance Hatherston herself.”

The orphan answered only by a faint smile.

“ Mother ;” said her son with a sternness of tone in which he had never hitherto ad-

dressed her; "will nothing teach you to do justice to your niece? Shall I tell you her first impulse on finding herself the owner of this long-hidden treasure? It was to secure the marriage, and by so doing, to save the life, of your daughter. Her first cry was 'Florence! Florence will be saved!' and that cry arrested the spirit of my father which was already hovering between life and death."

Lady Harriette sank back, and covered her face with her hands.

"It was not enough;" pursued Horace, whose voice suddenly became unsteady as he caught the deprecating look of Ella; "it was not enough that for us she had been despoiled of what was at that time her all; she was once more ready to sacrifice herself even for one who had evinced towards her nothing but neglect and indifference. Already, although this discovery is not yet three hours old, she has urged me to start at once for London, and to dispose of a sufficient quantity of those jewels to secure a proper marriage-portion for my poor sister."

"And she has done right, quite right;" ex-

claimed Lady Harriette, as she abruptly resumed a sitting posture ; “ There is indeed no time to be lost ! Thank you, my dear girl ; ” she added, as she held out her hand to the orphan : “ you have relieved my heart of a heavy weight.”

As she resigned the extended hand, poor Ella, wounded to the very heart, glided from the room, and returned to the bedside of her uncle. She had not sought for thanks, but she yearned to feel that she had comforted a mother mourning over her dying and absent daughter ; and even this gratification, unselfish as it was, had been denied to her.

“ And is that all ? ” demanded her son, while the crimson tide of indignation flashed over his cheek and brow ; “ Is that all the acknowledgment which Lady Harriette Ashton can afford to offer to the woman who saves her family from ruin, and her first-born child from death ? If my father’s niece can claim no further expression of gratitude for her noble generosity, it shall at least be tendered to my betrothed wife.”

“ Horace ! ” exclaimed his mother, starting

to her feet ; “this is more than I can bear, even from you.”

“I have the sanction of my father to the marriage, and I have the authority of the law ;” said Disborough steadily ; “and I can only entreat that you, my mother, will not suffer your baffled hopes and unjust prejudices to betray you into any intemperance of word or action, which you may one day have bitter cause to regret.”

“Do you threaten me, Lord Disborough ?”

“By no means ; I simply warn you. And is it too much to ask that when you consider for how many years that patient, uncomplaining orphan has been the good angel of our house ; and that, despite all the thanklessness with which her kindly and untiring zeal and affection have been met, she is still willing to share our fortunes, and to brighten them—is it too much to ask that every member of the family should confess to her alike their obligation and their gratitude ? I think not, madam—I think not. Even Ella, perfect as she is, may chance to remember that she owes something to herself ; and even to doubt

whether it were the will of her father that his heiress should, by an uncalculating generosity, unfortunately so rare in the world that no testator would be likely to provide against it, despoil herself for others, and become a mere young lady of good fortune. These will be serious considerations for you, I feel convinced; while for myself, I blush at my own worldliness in having given them utterance. My only excuse is therefore that our whole after-prosperity hinges upon this crisis: and that our destiny is in the hands of my cousin. You are not yet aware that my noble-hearted father was sending for Saunders at the moment when he became insensible; and sending for him to authorise the sale of Ashton Court."

"Without my sanction!" exclaimed Lady Harriette.

"To save the life of Florence—but now the good work will be done by Ella, and the home of our ancestors still remain our own."

There was silence for a few seconds: and then Lady Harriette said in a subdued voice:

“Send her to me again. I will do all you wish.”

The orphan could not however obey the summons. As her patient in his restlessness tossed to and fro, and she had been engaged in smoothing his pillows, he had possessed himself of one of her hands; and had finally fallen into a quiet sleep, still retaining his hold. The narcotic had at length taken effect, and his slumber was as deep as death. But still his patient nurse feared to awaken him by any movement on her own part; and thus she passed the night, with the travel-worn and weary ayah stretched upon the carpet at her feet.

Ella did not droop an eyelid; her thoughts were busy alike with the past, the present, and the future; but most they rested upon the voluminous packet of papers which Horace had locked into his father's bureau. Would they indeed establish the certainty of her own father's honour and uprightness?—Should she never again be tortured by the contemptuous doubts and tauntings of Lady Harriette?—Such were the questions which she asked her-

self. Then floated through her brain a vision of her cousin Florence dying heart-broken in a foreign land, and the almost miraculous help which had come to them, and by which she was to be saved. Her uncle lying supine beside her, who had fallen asleep in sorrow, and who she trusted would awaken to joy; her own betrothal to Horace; the return of her devoted ayah; all passed in succession before her, until she at length recurred to the casket of gems. What if Lady Harriette should be correct, and that they should prove to be comparatively valueless! The doubt was torture to her; and as in the loneliness of her night-watch it grew upon her more and more, the poor girl wept large, and cold, and silent tears such as she had never shed before. Then indeed she could do nothing, and Florence and her uncle would die. Never for an instant did she remember that if they were truly what they seemed, she was suddenly raised to considerable wealth, and rendered personally independent of all family ties; Ella never thought of herself; and so the weary vigil dragged on hour by hour until the

sullen dawn gleamed chill and grey athwart the closed curtains, and the lamp paled before its increasing power.

Never, perhaps, had the heiress to such a Golconda passed through such a night !

At sunrise, while she still sat shivering with cold and weariness, Sir Hercules slowly awoke, and as he opened his eyes they fell upon her white and anxious face.

“Ella !” he murmured faintly.

“I am here, dear uncle.”

“And why are you there, my child ? What does this mean ?”

“You have been ill, uncle ; very ill ; and I remained to watch you.”

“Tell me, Ella ;” said the baronet ; “have I had a frightful dream, or is it really true that my poor child—that Florence—”

“It is true, uncle ;” she replied softly but firmly ; “that my cousin Florence is very ill ; but had you dreamed out all your dream you would also have been aware that she will soon be restored to you in health and happiness.”

But even as she gave him this assurance a shudder ran through her frame lest she should

be unwillingly deceiving him ; “ Look ;” she continued, as she pointed to the Indian woman who was still buried in sleep ; “ my poor ayah is arrived—”

Sir Hercules with some difficulty raised himself on his elbow ; and then as large drops gathered upon his forehead, he gasped out : “ Tell me all.”

The orphan obeyed ; and while he listened the eyes of the baronet grew brighter, and a tinge of colour mounted to his cheek.

“ And so, my dear uncle ;” concluded Ella ; “ directly that you are well enough and strong enough to spare him, Horace will depart on his errand.”

“ This is too much—too much ;” faltered the sick man ; “ I ought not to permit you to make such a sacrifice.”

“ Are you not one day to be my father ?” asked the orphan fondly ; “ and can a child do too much for her parent ?”

The breast of the baronet heaved convulsively. He did not attempt to reply. And so they watched together the increasing light in silence until Ella rising from her seat

walked to the large oriel window which opened to the East, and the room was instantly flooded with sunshine.

“See, uncle;” she said solemnly; “the night is spent, and a new day has risen. So be it with you, and with your fortunes.”

No wonder that Sir Hercules visibly rallied under the care of such a nurse.

The first inquiry of Mr. Compton on his arrival, after he had ascertained the state of his patient, and expressed his satisfaction at his amendment, was whether the packet of papers had been mentioned to him?

Ella replied in the negative.

“That is well; was the reply; “and now I entreat of you, Miss Ashton, to make no allusion to them whatever; as, although Sir Hercules has rallied even beyond my hopes, his intellect is not yet sufficiently compact to enable him clearly to follow out two leading ideas. Rely on it that his anxiety and perplexity about his daughter will engross his mind for a time to the exclusion of every other subject. After such a shock as he has undergone both the mental and physical energies require to be

carefully husbanded. With so devoted and judicious a nurse as yourself, I see no objection whatever to the immediate departure of Lord Disborough; indeed, I should strongly urge it; as, until his return, it will be impossible thoroughly to tranquillise the mind of Sir Hercules, and to prepare him for any further demand upon it which may be imperatively necessary. Do me the favor to make my request known to the earl; who, in addition to every other consideration should, it strikes me, be present when the very important communication still to be made to our patient is ventured on. You will excuse me, my dear young lady, if as an old and fast friend of your family, I venture to offer advice which is not strictly professional; and you will not mistake my motives."

Ella answered with a tearful smile.

"Compton;" suddenly exclaimed the sick man drawing aside the curtain of his bed, and speaking in a voice so strong and sharp as to startle both his listeners; "My daughter Florence is dying—Could you not go to Italy, and bring her home?"

“Make yourself perfectly easy, my good sir;” was the cheerful reply; “young ladies do not die of her disease in a week or a month; and happiness will prove a far better physician than I could do. Only get well yourself, and I shall be greatly surprised if we have not some gay doings at Ashton Court before Christmas.”

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LAST CHAPTER.

ALL was arranged as Mr. Compton had suggested, and the following morning Horace was on his way to town, having in his custody the precious casket. His prophecy as regarded the mental unity of Sir Hercules was also confirmed ; the vision of his suffering daughter, and his anxiety for her return, having temporarily blotted out every other consideration and memory.

A week of acute and painful suspense supervened ; but at its close a letter arrived from Disborough. He had obeyed the wishes of Ella, and had disposed of diamonds to the

amount of six thousand pounds, the marriage-gift which she destined for Florence.

“The moment was propitious ;” he wrote ; “as the jeweller of the late Lord Disborough had been seeking in vain for sundry stones of this particular size and water to complete the bridal set of a foreign princess, which he had hitherto been unable to procure. We are now in treaty for some of the coloured stones ; and you may assure my dear cousin that she will never regret her generosity when she sees that there still remain, if I do not greatly mistake her character, as many jewels as she will ever care to possess in her enchanted casket.”

In another week Horace was once more at home.

“I have deposited with my father’s banker, Ella ;” said Disborough, as they sat together some hours subsequently beside the bed of the baronet ; “the sum of fifteen thousand pounds ; and as I know that you are incapable of changing your mind upon so serious a subject, I think that no time should be lost in informing Elwood of the fact that six of

those thousands are to form the dowry of Florence."

"Oh, write at once, dear Horace;" exclaimed the excited girl; "do not lose a post. Every moment is precious. Poor, poor Florence!"

"It strikes me that it would be well Lady Harriette should write, as my father is unable to do so," was the reply; and as the baronet agreed in this opinion, the young man left the room and proceeded to that of his mother.

Lady Harriette listened to the proposal in silence. "I will comply with your request most willingly;" she said after a pause; "but I consider that my duty demands something more. In the invalid state of Matilda, neither she herself, nor Elwood, who is of course engrossed with his wife, are proper or suitable travelling companions for their sick sister. Moreover, it is highly expedient that either I, yourself, or your father, should be introduced to the parents of the prince, and obtain their formal sanction to the marriage. Now for Sir Hercules to undertake such a journey is simply impossible in his present state; while for you

to absent yourself from home at the present crisis would be highly inexpedient ; your father cannot dispense with your presence, and he is quite indifferent to mine ; while, on my side, I can feel no anxiety about him since both you and Ella will be his constant companions."

"You are no doubt right ;" replied her son ; "and I see but one objection to the plan that you suggest. It will be impossible for you to travel alone."

"By no means. With my own maid, one man-servant and a courier, I need apprehend neither difficulty nor danger."

"But you overlook the fact ;" said Disborough, once more painfully indignant at her egotism ; "that such a style of travelling will involve a heavy expense ; and that we are not at present—"

Lady Harriette uttered a low irritating laugh ; "Your lordship overlooks the fact ;" she interposed ; "that your betrothed wife is now an heiress, who can afford to scatter thousands without sensibly diminishing her treasures. Nevertheless, should she oppose my wishes, her will must of course be obeyed.

You had better make the enquiry while I write my letter."

"It is unnecessary ;" said Horace coldly ; "my will is Ella's ; and your ladyship can commence your journey as soon as your preparations are made."

The cold keen spark shot from the eyes of Lady Harriette as she rose and walked towards her writing-table. "So be it ;" she said haughtily ; "I had yet to learn that I am not still the mistress of Ashton Court."

Disborough sighed : to him it was painfully apparent that no circumstances, be they what they might, could ever reconcile the perverse nature of his mother to the conviction of the heavy obligations which both herself and her family had incurred towards the gentle girl whom she had so long crushed under her iron rule ; and while he exulted at the unforeseen good fortune which had released Ella from her tyranny, he could not stifle a regret that although still wealthy, his cousin in her unbounded liberality to her relatives, was by no means sufficiently so to enable them to establish themselves in a separate home

suitable to his present rank. Had he been—and oh! how earnestly did he wish that it were indeed so!—Had he been still plain Horace Ashton, there would have been no difficulty; and he could have effectually screened his beautiful young wife from the sneers and sarcasms of Lady Harriette; but under existing circumstances he saw no method of escape; and a feeling of sadness crept over him which he could not conquer.

The letter apprising the Elwoods of Florence's "inheritance;" (for such the gift of Ella was designated by her aunt) and the intended journey of Lady Harriette herself to Nice, was dispatched; and a fortnight afterwards her ladyship departed, evidently well pleased to escape the monotony of Ashton Court, where every project which she had formed of late had been frustrated; every hope blighted; and every ambition thwarted. The change which had taken place in the character of her husband, and which she attributed with perfect justice to his affection for his orphan-niece, filled her with indignation; while that *her* son—her *only* son—whom she had herself

ennobled, should persist in placing the coronet of a countess on the brow of a mere dependant—a poor relation—(Lady Harriette was far from logical in her paroxysms of temper) that he should bestow *her* title—HER'S—upon a half-caste—one who had only barely escaped being the daughter of a black woman—fretted her to the very soul. She made strange companionship with such thoughts as these, while every kindlier memory faded from her mind. She *would* not realise that the power of hastening to the side of her suffering child had been bestowed on her by Ella; she regarded the dowry of Florence as the tardy payment of a debt long due; for had not the orphan been clothed, and fed, and sheltered beneath her uncle's roof? But enough, enough of this. We will leave Lady Harriette to pursue, at her own will, her journey to Nice.

It was remarkable what a strange sense of relief was experienced by the little party at Ashton Court after the departure of its mistress. Sir Hercules, comparatively at ease with regard to his daughter, began rapidly to regain his energies; and it was only a few days

subsequent to what each tacitly felt to be a moral emancipation, that Mr. Compton during his visit said quietly to his patient :—

“ You will very soon emulate your name, my dear sir, and become a Hercules in strength. Your late attack has ended in smoke, and not even a threatening of gout have you had for the last three weeks. What say you ? Shall we tell you a little news ? ”

“ With all my heart ; ” replied the baronet ; “ provided it be not that the confounded railway company have made another ‘ call. ’ ”

“ Confounded railway indeed ; but I have never burnt my fingers there, and am sincerely sorry that you cannot say the same. However, that is nothing to the purpose. My news relates to your niece.”

“ To Ella ? What of her ? ”

“ Do not alarm yourself, my dear uncle. Under your protection nothing can harm me ; ” whispered the orphan ; “ secure of your affection nothing can wound me ! ”

The baronet threw his arms about her, and pressed his lips to her brow.

“ Father ; ” said Horace calmly but impres-

sively ; “you have forgotten the papers which the box that is to save our poor Florence also contained.”

Sir Hercules turned ghastly pale for an instant, and then he demanded in a voice more steady than his medical friend had ventured to anticipate ; “What have you learnt from them ? What is their nature ?”

“Nay, my dear father ;” replied his son ; “we could not violate so sacred a trust, and break the seal of a packet addressed exclusively to yourself. When you feel quite equal to the exertion——”

The baronet extended his hand impatiently ; and Disborough in another instant placed the papers within it.

For a moment Sir Hercules looked down affectionately upon the well-remembered characters ; his suppressed emotion was evidently violent ; and the first impulse of his watchful friend Mr. Compton, was to forbid this investigation from a dread of its consequences ; but he reseated himself as he saw the eyes of his patient raised from the packet and directed upward, where he was seeking the

strength which he felt to be wanting in himself.

After awhile, as though his prayer had been answered, he said calmly :

“ Break the seal, Horace.”

“ Father,” said Disborough, as he examined the contents of the packet ; “ here are numerous business-papers and a letter.”

“ Pardon me for interrupting you for an instant ;” exclaimed Mr. Compton, rising abruptly ; “ but I have just remembered a pressing engagement which will admit of no delay. With your permission, I will see you again in an hour, Sir Hercules.”

“ My son ;” said the baronet, when he was alone with Horace and his niece. “ Read the letter. I cannot do so ; my tears would blind me. Ella, my child ; your affectionate heart was more prophetic than my own. We are about to listen to a thorough vindication of your father. I feel it ; and now, should my poor Florence be saved, I shall have nothing more to ask in this world. You, my dear children, have sufficient present means to satisfy your ambition, and one day you will be, in

all human probability, wealthy beyond your wishes. Matilda is happy ; and when I have learned from himself that my dear exiled brother died honoured and at peace, my task in this world will be over."

As he ceased speaking, the orphan nestled still more closely to him.

"True, my child, true ;" he murmured fondly : "I have still you to love and bless—You, the best solace of my old age."

With a glance of anxious tenderness at Ella, Horace commenced the perusal of the letter. These were its contents :—

" Calcutta, April 7, 18—.

"MY DEAR BROTHER,

"The appeal which will have been placed in your hands by the admirable and devoted creature who has charge of my child, will have prepared you for the merely business-communication which I am now about to make. For several years I have transmitted to the Bank of England, through the medium of my tried friend Mr. Braveby of this city, the large

sums which I from time to time received from the munificent father of my lamented wife ; and which, at this period, I find to amount to ninety thousand pounds. No dividends have ever been received, and consequently a considerable accumulation must have taken place. You will find among the papers which I now forward to you, the name and address of the stockbroker who has transacted the business ; though I believe this precaution to be unnecessary, further than that it will apprise you that the money in question stands in the names of Horace Westland only, and not in that of Ashton. Furthermore, you will receive herewith the title-deeds of an estate in Dorsetshire, which I purchased in the hope of making it one day the home of my dear departed wife ; and which is let on a lease for fourteen years to a very old and esteemed friend, whom I entreat both yourself and my beloved daughter not to disturb, should he, at the termination of that period, desire to retain possession. The rental is three thousand pounds a-year. He also knows me only as Horace Westland ; and to him you will perceive that I have now writ-

ten, to inform him of my real name, and the existence of my child. I have no more to add save again solemnly to express my conviction that you will be a father to the desolate orphan so early bereaved of both her parents—that you will make her life happy—and that she will never feel her loss. My Will will acquaint you with the few bequests which I have made ; and although I am well aware that money is no consideration to yourself, yet, as my sole executor, I trust you will receive the ten thousand pounds bequeathed to you in the same brotherly spirit in which they are offered. I have done. May the blessing of a dying man rest on you and yours, and on my own dear, dear child.

“HORACE WESTLAND ASHTON.”

It was not without considerable difficulty that Lord Disborough succeeded in reaching the termination of the letter. Its contents were so astounding that his breath almost failed him as he read ; while Sir Hercules sat leaning forward in his chair, grasping the arms tightly, and gazing straight before him like

one in a dream. The most composed individual of the party was the orphan, who was quietly weeping over the expressions of tenderness and affection which appeared to her to come from the grave of her father. She had scarcely understood, and altogether unheeded, the fact that she was now one of the wealthiest heiresses in England. Her thoughts had flown back to her birth-place, and to the fond parent whose image had, even at this remote period, not wholly faded from her memory.

“Ella!” at length exclaimed Horace.

She looked up, and wiped away her tears.

“My dear Ella, have you an idea of the change which the discovery of this box has power to effect in your future destiny?”

“I think I understood that my dear father had given me ninety thousand pounds and a house;” was the calm reply; “Will that suffice to pay off all the mortgages? Shall we be happy once more, and never again be troubled about money?”

“My dear cousin;” said Disborough gravely; “the originally large sum bequeathed to you

by my uncle has been accumulating for a considerable space of time. When you reached England you were a child of six years old, and you are now eighteen. It will require some calculation to arrive at the real amount of your property."

"Horace;" faltered the baronet; "Can this really be true? Let me hold the letter in my own hand to convince myself that it actually exists; Oh, that this unhappy box should have been so long lost to us; Ella, my dear child, what can we say to you of the past?"

"Say, my good kind uncle? That you have indeed been, as my dear father felt that you would be, a second parent to his orphan girl. Not a frown, nor an unkind word, have I ever seen or heard from you; and if the love of a grateful heart can repay you for all these long years of affection you know that it is yours."

"But it is right that you should be told, Ella;" persisted Disborough; "that you may now work out your own worldly career; for you are rich enough to command even a ducal

coronet. Do the strawberry-leaves not tempt your ambition?"

The answer was an extended hand, which he clasped, and pressed upon his lips.

At this moment the pony-carriage of the Dowager Lady Elwood was seen approaching the house. Since the departure of Lady Harriette she had already twice visited Ashton Court, and her presence was always hailed with delight by its inmates, but on this occasion she was doubly welcome.

"Why, my dear girl;" she said wonderingly, when the tale of Ella's heirship had been briefly told by the baronet; "I should have thought that the fruits from Aladdin's jewel-garden which you showed me when I was last here, were as handsome a provision as any reasonable young lady could have desired; and now here you are about to play among us the role of Queen Sheba, laden with costly gifts. You must really look to it, my dear lord, or she will fly away from you on a sun-beam, or perform some other extraordinary miracle; for there is no calculating on her next exploit."

Ella laughed her own soft silvery laugh.

“One thing I strongly advise;” pursued the countess; “which is that Lord Disborough should lose no time in settling all these formidable affairs; and be cautious to have the very best legal advice. The funded property has long ere this, as a matter of course from its having remained unclaimed beyond the stipulated ten years, been transferred to the Commissioners of the National Debt; but as there can be no possible difficulty in identifying Miss Ella Ashton, and proving her claim, that will easily be arranged. You see, Sir Hercules, that I am half a lawyer myself.”

“You are every thing that is estimable and admirable, madam;” replied the baronet; “and Horace cannot follow better advice than yours.”

“I have also another counsel to offer;” she continued; “and that is that this strange event should remain a secret to our absent children until their return. Both the poor girls are out of health, and Lady Harriette’s intelligence and arrival at Nice will create as

much excitement as they will be able to support."

Her advice was strictly followed; and after some difficulties and delay, the necessary proofs of the orphan's identity having been furnished by her relatives and the ayah, she found herself in possession of nearly one hundred and fifty thousand pounds and the Dorsetshire estate; whose tenant being in infirm health, and anxious to take up his abode in the south of France, gladly vacated it.

When Ella had succeeded in explaining to the Indian woman, with whom her intercourse was now very difficult from the fact of her having entirely forgotten her language, the delight of the ayah was almost terrible to witness; she laughed and wept alternately, and uttered a succession of weird wordless sounds that thrilled through the heart of her listener; then she threw herself upon the floor beside her and clasped her knees, until gently and affectionately the orphan drew her to her bosom, and they mingled their tears together as they had often done in long-past years of trial and suffering.

“And what will Ella’s own dear Diana do?” at length murmured the low voice of the young mistress; “Will she be made rich, and return to her own land and her own people?”

The answer of the devoted nurse was uttered in the same spirit, if not in the same words, as that of Ruth to Naomi.

“Piccaninny land, Dia’s land—Piccaninny rich, Dia rich—no more go—no more part.”

“Be it so;” said the weeping girl; “we will part no more; my home shall be your home; and we will be to the last hour of life as my father willed that we should be—mother and child.”

The Indian woman breathed out one long sobbing sigh; and then withdrawing herself from the arms that were folded about her, she moved slowly across the room, seated herself in an obscure corner, and buried her face upon her knees.

“Horace;” said the orphan a few days subsequently; “I have just received a letter from my kind friend Madame Despreaux to announce that the period of her marriage is

now definitively fixed. You know all that I owe to her. Will you permit me to send her a wedding present?"

"Permit you, Ella?"

"Well, pardon the expression. You know how deeply I am indebted to her;" she continued with a warm blush; "to her I owe everything, even your love; for without her generous care——"

"Ella—my own Ella——"

"True;" she replied; "I must once more ask your forgiveness; the remark was a thoughtless one; think no more of it. Well then, I have your sanction to send her four thousand pounds?"

"You have my sanction, since it is your wish to consult me on the subject, to do whatever you feel to be right and worthy of you."

"Thanks. Then you will arrange this little matter for me?"

"Most willingly."

Our tale is nearly told. In due time the travellers reached their home, Lady Harriette triumphantly leading in her wake the Prince

of Cazerno, now the betrothed husband of Florence, who was radiant with happiness and rapidly-returning health. The venerable dowager was at Ashton Court to receive them ; and as the whole party were assembled round the gouty chair of the baronet the wondrous tidings of Ella's sudden wealth were told. We will not attempt to describe their effects upon the amazed and breathless listeners. We trust that we have made our readers sufficiently acquainted with their several characters to enable them to form their own idea of the feelings elicited in each ; and we will consequently only add that it was at an unusually late hour that Lord and Lady Elwood and their venerable mother, accompanied by the young Italian who it had been arranged should reside with them until his marriage, prepared to set forth for The Chase.

“ My dear madam ; ” whispered the orphan, as while arranging the shawl of the dowager, according to her invariable custom, she led her to the deep bay of one of the windows ; “ I have a great favour to ask of you before you go.”

“It is granted my dear girl, if it be in my power to grant it.”

“I am anxious;” said Ella with some embarrassment; “to be one of the sponsors to Matilda’s first-born child.”

“And is that all?” asked the countess with a smile; “I am quite sure that both Algernon and his wife will be delighted at the proposal.”

“And that your ladyship will be so very kind;” she resumed with a heightened colour and averted eyes; “as to take charge of my christening-gift to my little godson or god-daughter.”

As she spoke she placed in the hand of Lady Elwood a small purse of her own knitting.

“What is this, Ella?” asked the old lady; “wealthy as you now are, I must not countenance you in any act of unnecessary profusion.”

“Matilda was always my friend;” faltered out the orphan; “I beseech of you, my dear madam, not to deny my request.”

“So be it, then;” said the dowager; “I

will undertake to perform your wishes in every respect. I trust that you have here given me no cause to repent my promise."

* * * *

"Elwood:" said his mother, as on their road home she drew a diminutive purse from her pocket, and examined its contents by the light of the carriage lamps; "Ella is desirous to hold your infant at the font when we are blessed with it; and of whatever sex it may be, here is her baptismal-gift—a cheque for ten thousand pounds."

* * * *

"Horace, dear Horace;" whispered the orphan when their guests had driven off, as she threw her arms about his neck, and buried her blushing face in his bosom; "we need not now wander through the country with a barrel-organ to secure our fortunes!"

Those were the first and the last words of

reproach that Ella ever uttered to her husband.

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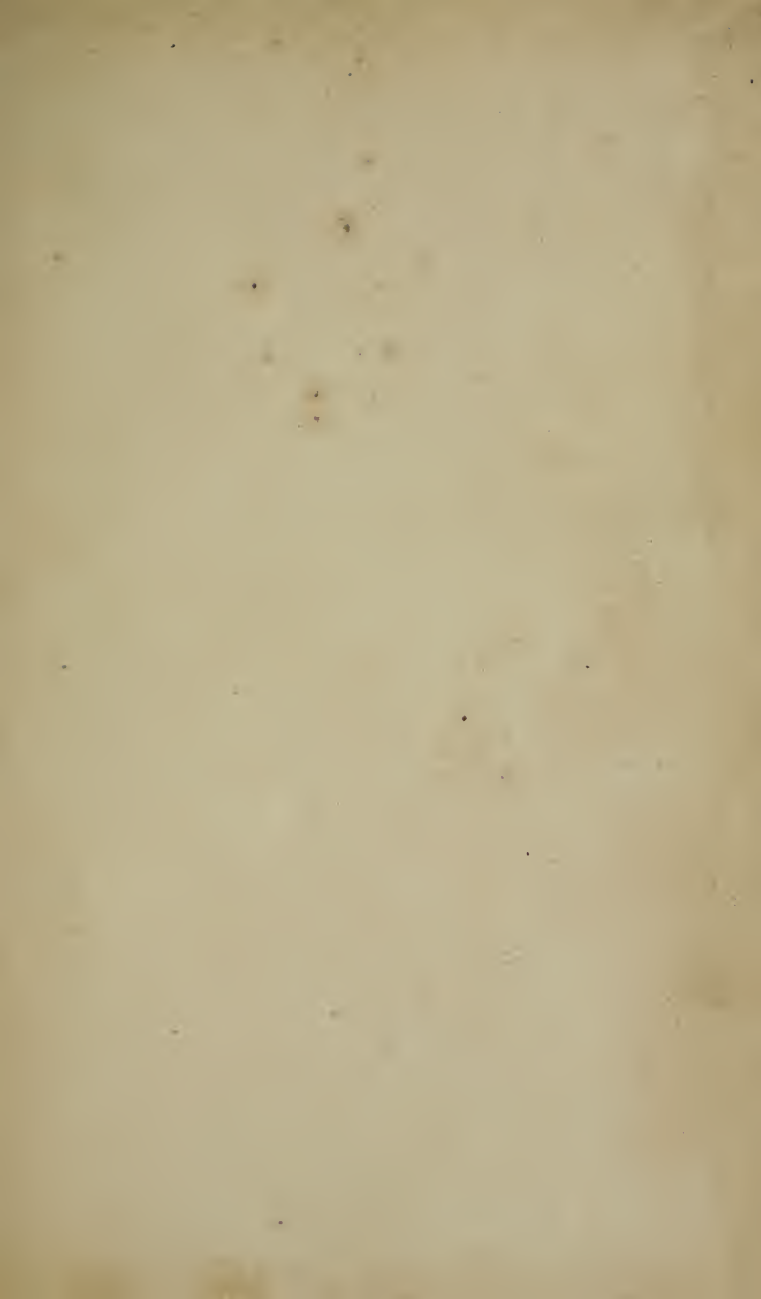
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The Cutemclose and Marshfield Railway Company ultimately overcame all obstacles, and the line is now considered to be one of the most profitable in England. Of course Lady Harriette takes all the credit of the speculation to herself; and equally of course, Mr. Goldworthy has been knighted, and a Lady Goldworthy at last reigns gorgeously at the Park.

THE END.



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